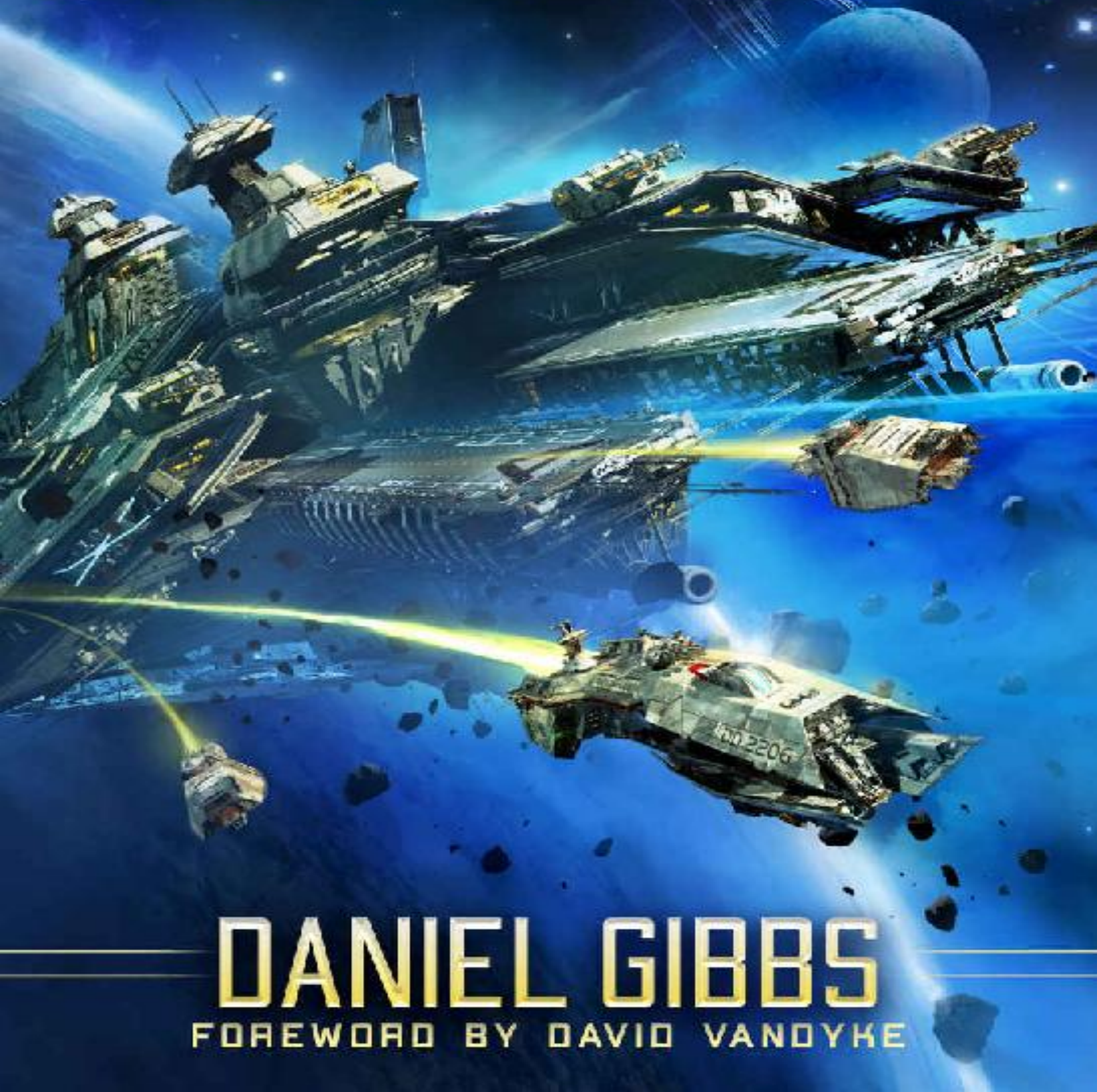
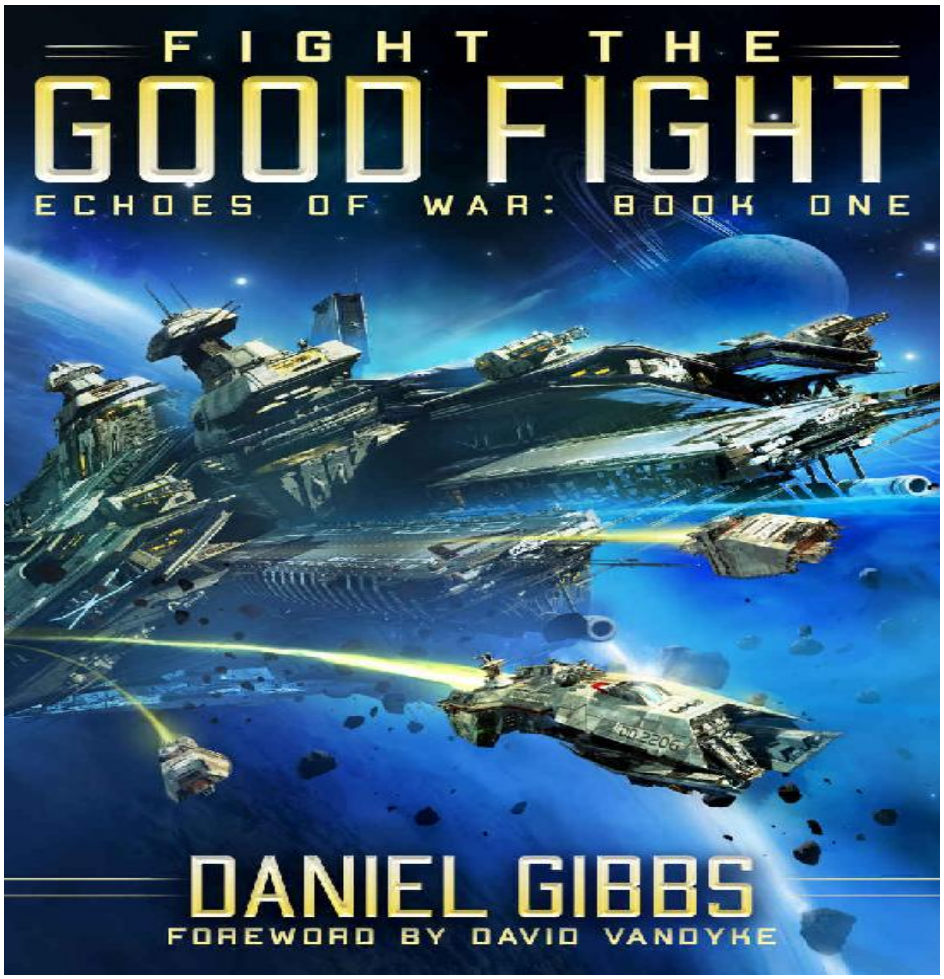
FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

ECHOES OF WAR: BOOK ONE



DANIEL GIBBS

FOREWORD BY DAVID VANDYKE


FIGHT THE
GOOD FIGHT
ECHOES OF WAR: BOOK ONE
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FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

ECHOES OF WAR BOOK ONE

DANIEL GIBBS

Fight the Good Fight by Daniel Gibbs

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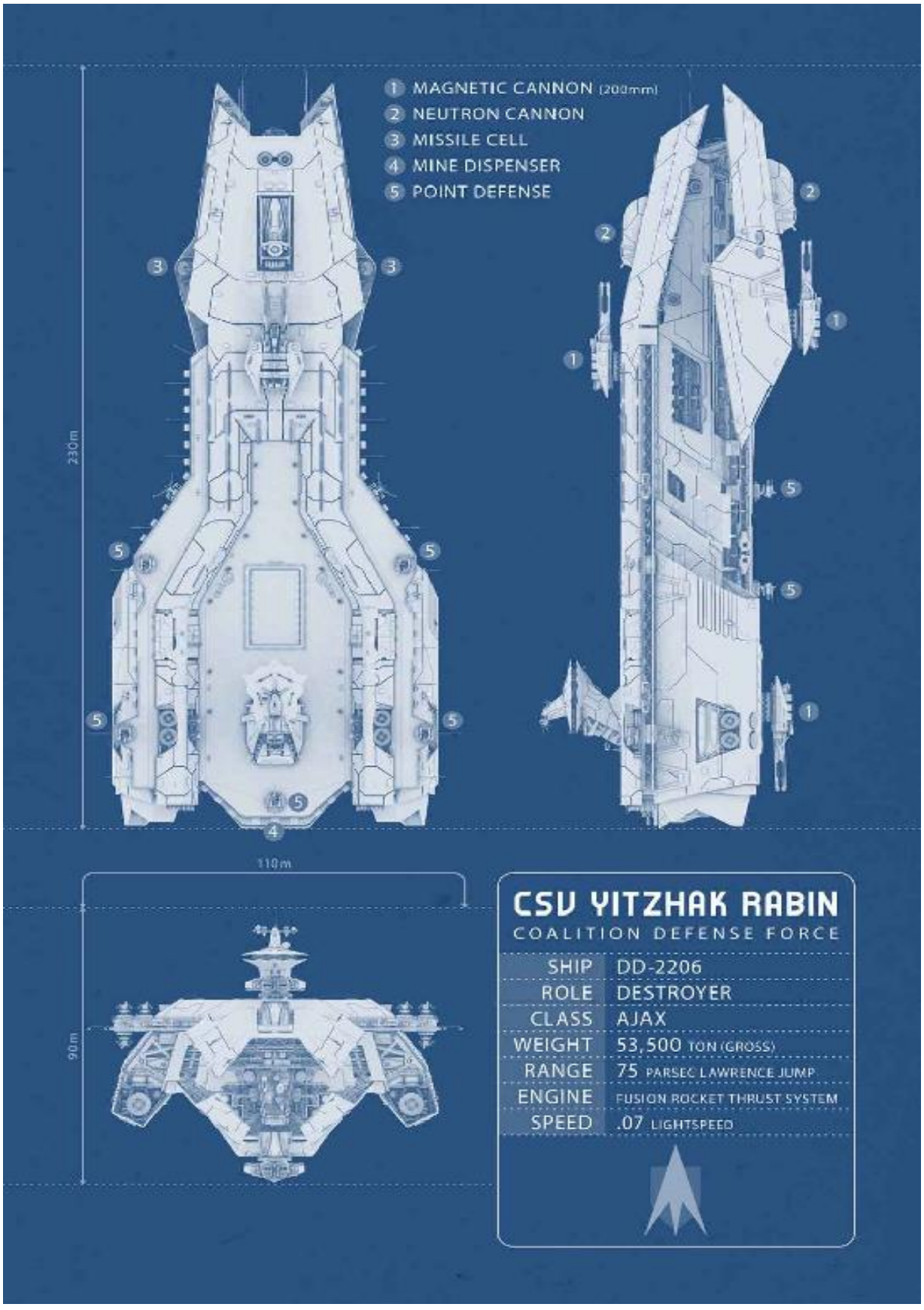
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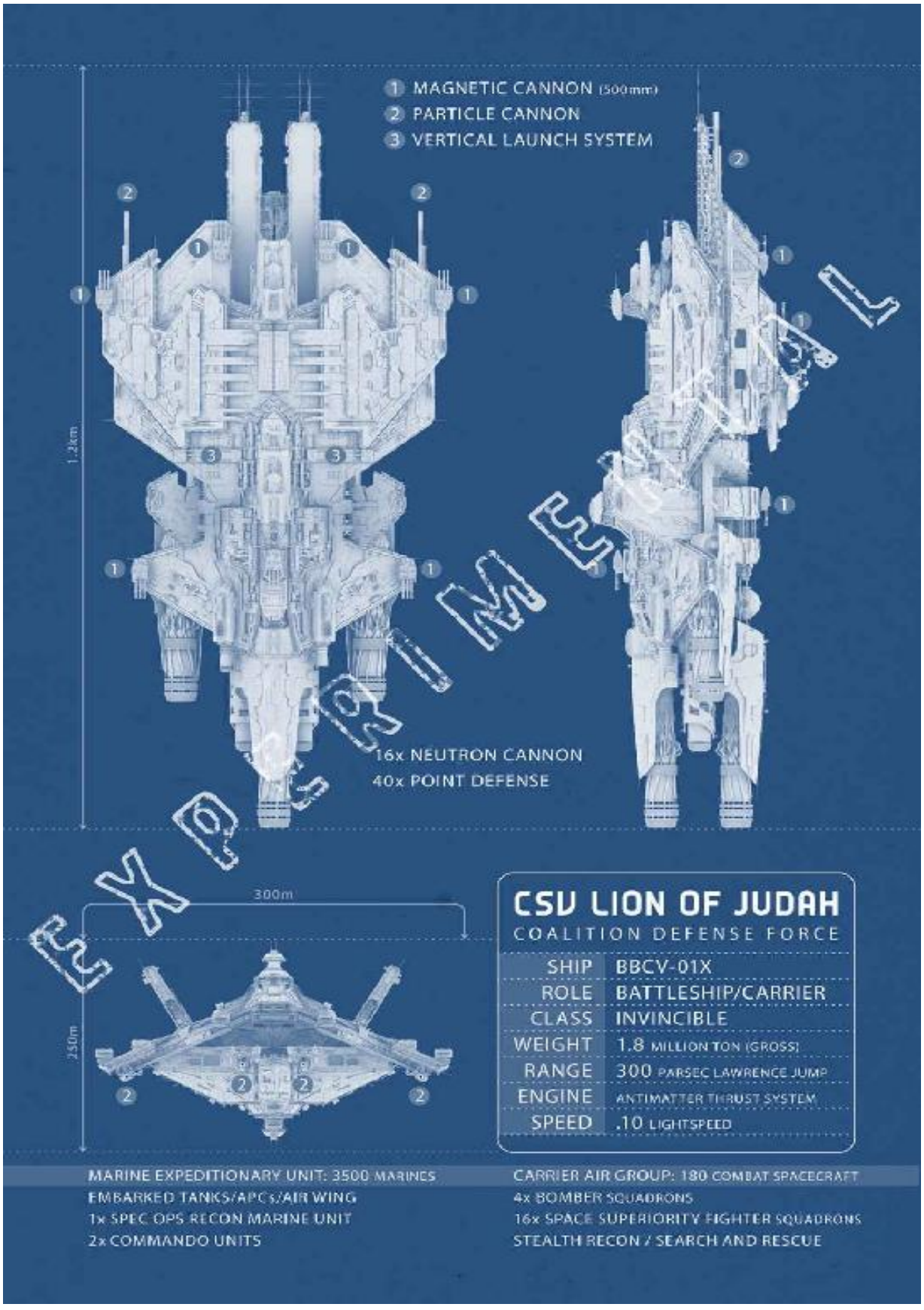
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COALITION DEFENSE FORCE

SHIP	DD-2206
ROLE	DESTROYER
CLASS	AJAX
WEIGHT	53,500 TON (GROSS)
RANGE	75 PARSEC LAWRENCE JUMP
ENGINE	FUSION ROCKET THRUST SYSTEM
SPEED	.07 LIGHTSPEED


1 MAGNETIC CANNON (500mm)
2 PARTICLE CANNON
3 VERTICAL LAUNCH SYSTEM
1.2km
16x NEUTRON CANNON
40x POINT DEFENSE
EXPERIMENTAL
300m
250m
CSV LION OF JUDAH
COALITION DEFENSE FORCE
SHIP BBCV-01X
ROLE BATTLESHIP/CARRIER
CLASS INVINCIBLE
WEIGHT 1.8 MILLION TON (GROSS)
RANGE 300 PARSEC LAWRENCE JUMP
ENGINE ANTIMATTER THRUST SYSTEM
SPEED .10 LIGHTSPEED
MARINE EXPEDITIONARY UNIT: 3500 MARINES
EMBARKED TANKS/APCs/AIR WING
1x SPEC OPS RECON MARINE UNIT
2x COMMANDO UNITS
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(With Gary T. Stevens)

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Book 3 - Breach of Duty
Book 4 - Breach of Trust

FOREWORD

Greetings, military science-fiction reader! I'm David VanDyke, Dragon and Hugo awards finalist and bestselling author or co-author of several hard-hitting and popular sci-fi adventure series—notably the Plague Wars series, the Stellar Conquest series, the Galactic Liberation series and B.V. Larson's million-selling Star Force series.

I originally ran across Daniel Gibbs on internet forums where independent ("indie") author-publishers like us meet to chat and exchange information and help each other in our tough business of trying to make a living writing great stories for you readers. He reached out to me for mentorship in bringing his vision of an explicitly Jewish military sci-fi hero—and the struggling, ideology-filled universe around him—to life on the page.

Daniel turned out to be a talented, teachable, hardworking guy, everything a good author should be—thoughtful, dedicated to improving his craft and his storytelling—and most importantly, entertaining to read.

Because that's what matters, am I right? As readers we want to be entertained with a rollicking great tale of action, combat, doubt, resolution, sacrifice, love and honor that reminds us all of what it is to be frail, fallible, struggling

human beings in the ugly, glorious, miserable and terrifying landscape of war.

For those of us who've been there in the midst of that cauldron, and whose service is behind us—for war's horrors most often fall upon the young—it's wonderful to fictionalize our experiences, always in the hope that our efforts in the past, and our stories in the present, will mean nobody else has to go to war in the future.

Daniel Gibbs is one of those guys.

Unfortunately, the end of war is a vain, if noble, hope. History shows us there will always be war, and as long as there is war, there will be books about war. In this case, we write about what war might look like in the future, for by understanding a thing, by exploring it in fiction, we seek to mitigate it as well as entertain.

I think it was H.G. Wells (though I confess I couldn't confirm the quote anywhere) who said, upon publishing his tabletop wargame rules Little Wars, "If all our wars were little ones, we might not need big ones." This may be a paraphrase of one quote I was able to confirm: "How much better is this amiable miniature than the Real Thing!"

Military sci-fi falls into that category—much more welcome between the pages of a book than on our streets and in our homes—or in our honorable service members' hearts and minds.

In this book, Fight the Good Fight, the first book Daniel Gibbs wrote—much amended and pored-over and rewritten as he developed his craft—you'll find all of those things I listed above: the highs and the lows, the horrors and the glories, as Corporal David Cohen rises from enlisted man to starship captain. You'll find more of his adventures in the rest of the Echoes of War series, which will be published over the course of this Year of Our Lord 2019.

David VanDyke

Major, USAF, Retired
Tucson, Arizona

1

CSV *Artemis*
Patrol Sector 14A – Terran Coalition / League of Sol Active Combat Zone
5 February 2544 (Old Earth Calendar)

Corporal David Cohen glanced at a clock showing Coalition Mean Time, or CMT, the standard metric for all CDF ships. *It's time for morning prayers…but there's no way I can make it to the shul and still keep on schedule for our repairs.* An Orthodox Jew, he was heartsick when he couldn't make it to prayers.

Taking a moment before heading to his post, David stood and prayed quietly. "May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord shine His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up His favor upon you and grant you peace." The prayer was from the Book of Numbers, in the Torah. *I hope, someday, we can have peace. But the ship isn't going to repair itself.*

David hefted his work belt and made sure it was strapped correctly around his waist. Fit, tall and six months out of boot camp, he'd kept his physical condition with a daily

exercise regimen despite the challenges of life in the fleet. His ship, the Coalition Star Vessel *Artemis*, was a small frigate specializing in point defense, assigned to space battle group centered around a Saratoga-class fleet carrier engaged in combat operations against their enemies, the League of Sol.

Making good time moving about the ship, David walked the passageways like a practiced professional, even after only a few months of being stationed in the fleet. Given a battlefield promotion to corporal, his duties now consisted of leading a damage control team during and after battle. This shift, they were working on a section of the ship that had experienced a total loss of pressure and significant battle damage in their last engagement. Today's task was to replace piping and wiring bundles throughout the damaged bulkheads and overhead after the hull patching had been completed the day before.

A young private from New Washington, Everard Beckett, groused as he pulled another length of burnt cabling out of the wall. "Corporal, can't we just patch this stuff on the surface and wait for an overhaul to make it look pretty?"

David narrowed his eyes as he pushed through another bundle of wire. "While we're at it, why don't we just leave the holes in the side of the ship? I mean, we've been disabled four times in the last three weeks. Wouldn't want to do it right, so the ship is at maximum combat effectiveness for the next time we fight the League, would we?"

Private Rachel Munford laughed. "There we go, ladies and gentlemen. Another attempt at cutting corners smacked down by our esteemed corporal."

David snorted as he pulled open another wiring tray. "I don't know why I bother with you, Beckett. You'll be someone else's problem in a couple of years anyway."

“Oh yeah, we know you want to get out, Corp,” Beckett said. “If I had a credit for every time you told us about your big plans to be a rabbi, I could buy one of these boats and go into business for myself privateering League ships.”

“Are you daft, Beckett? The League doesn’t have any merchant ships on this side of the galactic arm for us to privateer,” Munford said. “I’m just glad we’re out of the front lines for a few days while we get repaired. Being able to relax and actually take a shower is nice. Sometimes it really is the little things in life.”

“How about less jawing and more pulling cables so we can still get to the mess while hot food is being served?” David snapped.

“Aye aye, Corporal!” Beckett said, redoubling his efforts to pull the burnt cable out of its housing.

Over the next hour, the team worked their way through the passageway, and David noted with satisfaction they were far closer to restoring the cabling to a functional state.

Just as he was going to order a break for chow, the alert klaxon sounded. Without needing an order, the team picked up tools and loose materials. The commanding officer’s voice suddenly boomed across the ship wide intercom known as 1MC. “Attention all hands. Prepare to repel boarders. I say again, prepare to repel boarders!”

David instantly recognized the voice of Major Benson Pipes and his mind leaped into overdrive.

“Beckett, Munford, weapons locker… now.”

A look of fear crossed Beckett’s face. “Uh, Corporal, we’re not Marines. Shouldn’t we fall back to a protected space?”

In truth, David was terrified, not only of the enemy but also for the lives of those under his command. He resolved not to show it and press on. “No. We can’t chicken out here, Beckett. We’ve got to bottle up any hostiles until our Marines can get here and save us. Let’s go!”

Leading the team to the nearest weapons locker, David entered his access code and swung the door open. He quickly passed out armored vests to each, followed by particle beam sidearms, battle rifles, and magazines. “Ugh. Only one pulse grenade. I guess the sergeant-at-arms didn’t restock this one properly.” He took the grenade for himself.

Beckett threw an armored vest over his head, securing the straps around his chest. “Only thing worse than corporals are sergeants. Present company excluded, of course.”

“Of course,” David said, as he inserted a magazine into his battle rifle while the others followed suit.

Munford racked the action on her own battle rifle. “Ever wonder how much razzing Major Pipes got in boot camp? With a name like that…”

“Pipes, like water pipes,” Becket said, doing a passible impersonation of the COs voice.

“I didn’t realize I ordered you to give us a comedy routine, Beckett. You’re welcome to share that bit of knowledge with the major after we’re done here. Now stow it.”

A loud thud nearly knocked them from their feet. “They’ll breach the hull momentarily,” David said, steadying himself by holding onto the bulkhead. Working hard to ignore the panic building within, he tried to focus on his next action. *Drill Instructor Salazar always said to solve one problem at a time.*

“Let’s double back one passageway over.” Seeing bafflement in the others’ eyes, he explained, “It’s a choke point. They’ll have to push through that area to get to anything of importance. We’ll hold there until the Marines arrive.”

“Or we all get killed,” Beckett said, doubt in his voice.

Ignoring Beckett’s doubt, David led them to a junction between two passageways, an excellent defensive position. “Beckett, take the right.” He tried to convince himself the

incoming League troops were nowhere near as tough as his drill instructor. *If I survived Salazar, I can survive anything.* "Munford, take the left."

David crouched, shielding his body with the bulkhead and pointing the battle rifle down the corridor. "Remember, they'll use cannon fodder to wear us down. Aim well, fire short bursts, and remember that the real challenge is what comes after them."

"Isn't anyone with a gun that's trying to kill us a challenge, Corporal?" Munford said.

"Valid point. You know what I mean, though. They always hit us with green troops and reeducated prisoners first. We can do this, team."

After holding their position for what seemed like an eternity, the first League troops appeared from behind another bulkhead. David took aim and squeezed the trigger of his rifle, just like he had been taught in basic training. Nothing happened. He froze as the two Leaguers brought their own rifles up and sent a volley of shots in his direction. The bullets smacked the walls of the corridor and the bulkheads, bouncing off the hardened alloy in a shower of sparks.

David cleared the mental block in his mind like the chamber of his rifle. He ducked back to cover as Beckett and Munford returned fire. While Munford opened up on full automatic with "pray and spray" tactics, Beckett carefully sighted down his weapon and squeezed the trigger once, putting a burst into the center mass of an onrushing enemy. As that soldier fell, the one behind tripped over the body, losing his balance and dropping the rifle he carried.

Quickly checking his weapon, David realized he hadn't chambered a round. *I can't believe I made that kind of rookie mistake*. He slid the action back on his weapon and heard the satisfying click of a bullet sliding in. Leaning out, he brought

the rifle up and aimed at the remaining soldier, who was fumbling with a sidearm and squeezed the trigger. All three rounds from the burst hit the Leaguer center mass, and he flopped backward, landing on top of his fellow.

As the sound of gunfire subsided, David found himself stunned by the brutality of combat and the results of his actions. He'd never fired a weapon in anger before, let alone killed anyone. It took a moment to snap himself out of his funk and hit the communications panel on the wall. "This is damage control team fifteen, deck five, passageway 3B. We have engaged League boarders. Request Marine backup."

"We should fall back, Corporal!" Beckett shouted, his voice breaking.

"Get it together, Private!" David barked, trying to project confidence though he felt anything but. "If we don't hold here, the League gets full run of deck five. You know what that means!"

"They could take the engine room and jump the ship out," Munford said.

"Exactly. I'm not interested in being a League POW the rest of my life. If they hold true to form, next we'll be rushed by a human wave."

"First guy up has a gun, second holds the ammo and the third carries on once we finish killing the front of the line?" Beckett said with a trace of mirth.

"That's a myth."

"Corporal, they're coming," Munford said, urgency in her voice breaking through the calm.

Incoming fire splattered against the bulkhead, pinging off the hard metal. David felt a searing pain on his leg and looked down, seeing red spreading out from a cut in his uniform pants. With the rush of adrenaline coursing through his body from the battle, the pain only lasted for a few moments.

“Return fire!” David shouted, leaning out and firing short bursts. He hit two more enemy soldiers, but this time, numerous other Leaguers followed them and charged towards his small squad. They advanced without any real tactics, moving forward in a human wave, one with extremely lethal weapons.

David pulled out the pulse grenade on his belt. *I’ve only got one pulse grenade. They’ll overrun us if I don’t use it, so I better make it count. But we need more than just a grenade blast right now.* He looked back into the junction, desperately searching for any advantage, anything they could use. Through the fog of the battle, his mind cleared and brought him an idea. *The environmental controls!*

“Beckett, there’s an artificial gravity control node right next to your leg. Open it up and reverse the polarity for the passageway directly in front of us.”

“But it’ll only last a couple of seconds before the safeties reset and lock us out, Corp.”

“We only need a few seconds. Now do it!”

Beckett reached down to the panel, opened it and fumbled around with something inside. “Got it, Corp!”

“Pulse, over!” David shouted, pulling the pin from the grenade before tossing it down the passageway. He waited for the imminent explosion with hands over ears, mouth open and eyes closed, hoping the other two did the same as they’d been trained. With the bang of the explosion, he threw himself back into the line of fire to see a most peculiar sight: a dozen enemy soldiers in a heap, collapsed on what was, to David and his team, the overhead.

While a few of the poorly trained League soldiers groped about in the heap of bodies, trying to stand up, most held their hands up to their faces, or fired blindly toward the bulkhead opening. David fired in bursts along with Munford and Beckett, targeting the few that still had their weapons

first. Once those enemies were down, the three of them methodically felled the rest as they groped for fallen weapons and struggled to draw holstered sidearms. The bodies that lay beyond were too numerous to count.

In the lull of the combat, they exchanged glances. David's hand shook, making it difficult for him to reload his weapon. He could hear the whine of the resetting artificial gravity generator that would flip the space beyond "right side up" again. *Nice trick…while it lasted*.

"I didn't sign up for the Marines," Munford said.

David couldn't tell if she was being serious or trying to lighten the situation. "I don't think any of us did," he said, trying to focus on something, anything, except the bloody pile of bodies around the corner. "They're going to hit us again any second now." He peered toward the next bulkhead, looking for a sign they were coming.

"We're out of grenades, Corporal. If they hit us again like that, we're dead. We've got to pull back," Beckett said.

"No. We hold until the Marines arrive."

"Why? We're not equipped for this! We're a freaking damage control team, for the love of God!"

"Look, we don't have many Marines on this tub. All of us are trained to repel boarders, just like we're all trained to fight fires. Keep it together, Beckett. We can do this."

"Aye aye, Corporal," Beckett muttered, finally getting his rifle reloaded.

"Marines? I call them the Terran Coalitions misguided children," Munford said.

I guess she was going for humor after all. For all the calm David portrayed, his mind was a roiling sea of fear that threatened to break free. He knew they likely wouldn't survive another push, and was on the verge of ordering them to fall back when the communications panel beeped.

“Damage control team fifteen, this is Sergeant Morrison. Are you still with us?”

David slapped the control. “Yes, Sergeant. Not sure for how long.”

“You must hold your position. League boarding parties are all over deck five, and if you let them get past you, they’ll flank our defense and overrun the section—maybe the ship. We’ll be there ASAP, but it’s all on you, Corporal Cohen. Can you do it?”

Without even thinking through what he was about to say, fire shone in David’s eyes. “We’ll hold, Sergeant. Whatever it takes.” He stepped back from the panel and eyed the other two. “Now we hold. No matter what.”

Beckett and Munford nodded grimly, courage, resolution and fear flooding their faces.

Seconds later, another wave of League troops surged forward, firing down the passageway. David saw terror and panic in the eyes of the soldiers that faced them, akin to his own, but they weren’t stopping. He realized bursts weren’t cutting it, and toggled his battle rifle to full auto. “Full auto!” he ordered, hoping the others head him clearly above the din of battle.

Holding down the trigger, fighting to keep the gun level rather than wasting its precious stopping power on the overhead, he emptied the magazine in one long burst. Beside him, he heard his fellows doing the same, sending dozens of rounds down the passageway in a storm of steel.

The carnage from going full auto broke the enemy assault. Twisted bodies lay on top of each other on the deck, some screaming in pain. The smell of propellent was thick in the air, as were spent shell casings scattered about the defenders.

When a big, bulky power-armored League Marine came into view behind more cannon fodder, David’s heart sank.

Power armor, even the less effective League variant, was extraordinarily potent and made its wearer difficult to disable or kill. “Goliath! Aim for the upper body and head!”

Munford leaned out and sprayed the enemy formation with unaimed fire from her battle rifle. As it clicked dry, return fire from the Goliath’s directed energy weapon ripped into her arm, throwing her to the ground and bringing forth a grunt of pain.

“Beckett, when I fire, pull Munford back,” David yelled over the din of battle, reloading his rifle as he spoke. He was on his last magazine. He leaned to the right and opened fire, trying to distract the Goliath. Beckett grabbed Munford’s good arm and dragged her out of the passageway and the line of fire. “Get her to the rear and find a corpsman.”

“They’ll overrun you, David,” Munford said, trying to stem the flow of blood from her arm. *Funny, she called me David, not Corporal. Probably the pain getting to her head.*

“Yeah, Corp, we can’t leave you,” Beckett said.

“I’ll be all right. Get moving. She needs medical attention.” David fired blindly down the passageway as he spoke. “Now go!”

To cover their escape, David leaned back out and emptied his rifle into the Leaguers.

It almost worked.

Dragging her across the deck, Beckett had almost gotten Munford to safety when a stray energy beam caught him in the chest. He fell to the ground in a heap as Munford lay behind him, frozen in shock.

A moment later, she found the ability to flee, scrambling a few more feet to land behind the next bulkhead. Munford’s harsh grunts of effort echoed in David’s head, distracting him as he felt for his sidearm, knowing he was out of bullets for the rifle. With the practiced muscle memory of his training, he slipped the pulse pistol into his hand and

brought it up while turning the energy setting to maximum. Firing through the bulkhead opening, he felled another Leaguer who made the mistake of blindly charging forward.

A stray bullet connected with David's shoulder, sending him backward and causing searing pain to radiate through his body.

His pistol clattered to the deck.

He knew he was about to die.

Any moment now, the Goliath would crash into the junction, and even if David could kill him, there would be one coming right after the other until an enemy finally ended his life. His thoughts ran wild. *I don't want to die here... I never wanted to kill anyone! I cost Beckett his life*. The last thought caused a wave of guilt that distracted him from the task at hand.

David forced himself to pick up the fallen sidearm, fighting through excruciating pain to aim at the bulkhead opening. Time slowed as the Goliath burst through the bulkhead, the immense armor suit even more foreboding at close range. He squeezed the trigger of the pistol. The energy beam connected with the Leaguer's helmet, its weakest piece.

The heavy armor held as the Leaguer brought his own weapon up. He fired, sending a burst of rounds into David's center mass, slamming into his thin body armor. More pain swept over him and his pistol jerked up as the beam finally penetrated the helmet and sliced through the enemy's head. Little blood or human matter sprayed due to the cauterizing effects of the energy weapon.

David let go of the trigger, and the Goliath collapsed to the ground. He gasped, shocked he was still alive. The wind knocked out of him, he barely registered the curses and shouts from the remaining League troops. He was trying to force his body to comply with the mental command to raise

the pistol once again, when shots poured down the passageway from behind him. For a moment he despaired, certain the enemy had flanked them, until he realized from the distinctive sounds of the weapon it was friendlies—the Marines had finally arrived! A group of six, heavily armed and armored, thundered into the passageway junction.

"Report, Corporal!" the lead Marine, Sergeant Morrison, yelled as they filed into ready positions, weapons up and searching for targets.

David couldn't force a word out. He still reached for his sidearm, hands shaking, brain foggy. Morrison came over and shook his shoulder roughly. "Corporal!"

The loud word snapped David out of his trance. "My guys got hit. Beckett and Munford." He pointed toward Beckett's fallen body and the bulkhead Munford hid behind.

The sergeant spoke into his communicator. "I need corpsmen on deck five, passageway 3B, ASAP." Taking in the scene, Morrison's eyes widened. He looked back to David with surprise. "Damn, Corporal, you want to transfer to the Marines? There's got to be thirty dead Leaguers out there—and you took out a Goliath to boot."

Shock began to set in, and David shook uncontrollably.

"Corporal, are you wounded?" Morrison asked.

"I'm okay. Take care of Beckett and Munford first."

Morrison knelt, putting his hands on the bullets sticking out of the armored vest over David's chest. "Damn lucky, son. You're going into shock. Lie still, okay? Help will be here soon. Your fight's over for today."

David nodded at Morrison without trying to reply. Taking in the death and destruction around him, he stared at the dead bodies of the Leaguers and back at his hands several times. *What did I do?* he thought. *I…killed them.*

Even though the commandment *Thou shalt not murder* didn't really apply to war, it still roared into David's mind

with the punishing tone of an angry teacher. *It was them or me. Does that make it okay*? Eyes fixed on Becketts's body, David focused on a traditional prayer for the dead. He whispered to himself, "God, filled with mercy, dwelling in the heavens heights, bring proper rest beneath the wings of Your Angels, amid the ranks of the holy and the pure, illuminating like the brilliance of the skies the souls of our beloved and our blameless who went to their eternal place of rest."

Two corpsmen ran into the passageway carrying a medical bag, and a portable stretcher. One knelt next to David. "Corporal, can you hear me?"

"Privates Beckett and Munford need medical assistance before me."

"He's got a shoulder wound; looks like it went straight through. Leg abrasion consistent with a graze," the corpsman beside him said. "Likely rib fractures from the bullets and possible internal bleeding."

Out of the corner of his eye, David watched him check Beckett's vitals. "This one's dead," the other corpsman said. One of them pressed an auto-injector against David's neck. It stung for a second, then reality receded into a fog.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, David was aware of being placed on the stretcher and felt himself being carried down the passageway. "My team," he said, his voice distant and slurred.

"Munford's going to be fine, Corporal. Lie back and enjoy the ride," one of the corpsmen said. Unconsciousness finally took him, followed by nightmares of being shot over and over again.

2

THANKS to Terran Coalition medical technology, physical wounds healed far faster than mental ones. Standing in the lobby outside of the counselor's door, David felt a sense of trepidation. *I really don't want to do this*, he thought to himself. *But the sooner I get it done, the sooner I get back to my duties and finish my time. Then I can go home and never have to kill again.*

After the battle, the *Artemis* had been rotated back to a military space station for repairs and replacement crewmembers. On light duty during his recovery from the physical wounds he'd sustained, David was ordered to see a counselor—which was the only reason he'd come.

Next to the door under the counselor's nameplate was a button with a sign over it that read, "Please Press to Enter and Be Mindful of Others." Under that sign was a nameplate marked *Dr. Amy Ellison*.

He hesitated for a long moment, debating just walking away. Finally, he pushed the button.

A moment later, the door opened and a petite woman in her mid-thirties with straight, short, natural blonde hair motioned David in. "Come in, Corporal Cohen!" the woman said in a bright and cheery voice.

Oh great. It had to be someone that's bubbly and happy, he thought to himself as he tried to smile. Making his way into the small office, he sat down on a couch that had a pillow on it that proclaimed, "Prayer is the Answer!"

"I'm Doctor Amy Ellison. How are you doing today, Corporal?" she asked.

"I'm…okay, Counselor."

"I'm not in the CDF, Corporal Cohen. There's no need to be formal here. Please, call me Amy."

"Yes, ma'am… Amy."

"It's been challenging to get you down here to talk to me," she said, an easy grin showing.

"I… haven't wanted to talk about what happened," David said, his voice hesitant.

"Why not?"

David looked down. A voice inside his head screamed at him, *Because you killed eight people!*

"May I call you David?"

David looked back up and met her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

Amy leaned forward in her chair. "I see soldiers all day long that have been through a trauma such as you have. It's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, from what I've read in the after-action report, the commanding officer of your ship thinks you were directly responsible for preventing the League from gaining control of the *Artemis*."

"I killed… I don't know, at least eight people. Maybe more. I shot one in the head with a pulse pistol and watched the beam slice through his brain."

"Eight people that were trying to kill you and the two crewmembers who were with you."

"I look down at my hands now and see blood. I wanted to be a rabbi. I wanted to help people. How can I do that now? How can I do anything? I violated one of the Ten Commandments."

Ellison sat back, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Why do you want to become a rabbi, David?”

“To minister to people, to help them learn. The word ‘rabbi’ means teacher after all. I wanted to do good.”

“I think there’s more to it than that. I think you want to make up for something.”

Wow. She’s good. “What do you mean?”

“Where were you on September 28th, 2533?”

September 28th, 2533 was one of those days that if you were alive during it and able to remember, you never forgot. It was the day that the League of Sol, a super-national entity that controlled Earth and many colony planets, invaded the Terran Coalition.

That was also the day my father left for the last time, David thought, his heart sinking.

“I was at home with my mother and father,” David whispered, tears forming in his eyes.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Ellison pressed.

David’s mind flashed back to that fateful day that would forever be burned into his mind. “I was eight. My father was on terminal leave from the CDF. He was a reservist with twenty years in service. He’d spent the previous two years on active duty to top off his retirement earnings. He loved us. He’d do anything to protect us. He was a good man.”

As he spoke to her, David’s mind wandered back to the night his father, Levi Cohen, died. In his childhood, David knew that his father was an officer. Later, he came to understand that he was a major in the Coalition Defense Force. David’s mother, Sarah, was a homemaker and a traditional Jewish wife. They lived in an Orthodox enclave on Canaan, where his father was stationed at the main Canaan space dock. Every morning, the family would rise together at five a.m. His father would go off to work, and his mother would drop off David at school. In the afternoon, she would

pick him up after he'd finished with his after-school activities.

That night, raised voices coming from his parents' bedroom was the first indication that something was amiss in the Cohen household. David recalled creeping down the hall to listen in on the conversation in his parents' room.

"Sarah... I've got to do this. I'll come home as soon as I can," he heard his father say.

"I'm scared, Levi. I'm scared you won't come home this time. What if it's an invasion?" his mother said through sobs.

"Then we'll hold the line. I'm not going out alone, that's for certain. Let me finish getting dressed, and you go get David. I want to tell him goodbye before I leave."

"The party tomorrow was going to be perfect."

"Just postpone it a few hours, okay?"

"Okay," Sarah said, her voice level once more.

David took the cue to run back into his room, busying himself with his tablet that contained learning games and a GalNet link. His mother came into the room, calling for him as she wiped her eyes. "David, come say goodbye to your father. He has to go to work."

David put down his tablet and glanced at her, a confused expression on his face. "But I thought Dad was on leave for the next few weeks."

Sarah shook her head. "He's been recalled, so he's got to go in. I'm sorry. I know you were looking forward to him being here for your birthday."

David followed his mother as they both walked into the bedroom, where his father fussed with the rank pin on his collar.

Sarah laughed softly, then walked over to Levi and adjusted the pin.

"Thank you, dear," he said, a twinkle in his eye.

“You can never seem to get that pin right for all the trouble it caused you to earn it,” his mother said with a hint of a smile on her face.

His father looked over at David and motioned for him to come over. “Son, I’m sorry. I have to take command of a ship for the next few days.”

David sat down on the bed. “You’re retired, though. Why are they calling you now?” he asked with a baffled expression on his face.

Levi gave Sarah’s hand a squeeze, then walked over and sat down next to David and pulled him into his lap. “Because I’m not quite out of the military yet. I’m still under orders, son, so I’ll go where I am told and do what I need to do.”

David looked up at his father’s eyes. “Why you, Dad? Aren’t there others they can call instead?”

Levi paused for a moment. “I swore an oath son. Sure, there’s others, but they called on me, so I’ve got to go. David, listen to me. I know you’re young, and I know this is hard to understand.”

David’s eyes glistened with tears as he thought about his father being away yet again. It seemed like he never saw him anymore.

“Son, there are some things, like our freedoms, the right to say what we want, do what we want, worship God in the way that we want... Those are all things that we have had to fight for and must continue to fight for.”

Sarah inhaled sharply as David began to cry. “Dad, are you going to die?”

Levi smiled and patted his head. “No, son.” He looked toward Sarah. “Why don’t we take our picture for the album?”

At the time, David didn’t realize why, but he knew that every time his father went out on deployment, they took a family picture. Little did he know, it was so that there would

always be something to remember him by in case he did not make it home.

After taking the picture, Sarah and David followed Levi to the front door.

Levi set his space-bag down by the door and turned to hug David. “Take care of your mother, son. You’re the big man of the house while I’m gone.”

Levi stood and turned to kiss Sarah. “I love you. I’ll see you all very soon,” he said as he turned to walk down the drive, glancing down at David as he turned to walk away.

“Godspeed, Levi,” Sarah said as Levi walked toward his helicar.

Watching his father walk down the path toward the driveway filled David with both pride and overwhelming sadness. David took off running as his father got to his car. “Dad! Dad!” he shouted.

Levi turned around as David stood as tall as he could at the front of the path, holding his hand to his brow in the best imitation of his father’s salutes as he could. His father saw him, and as his face broke into a grin, Levi brought his hand to his brow in a crisp, practiced motion. Snapping his hand down, Levi turned away and climbed into his helicar. Moments later, it took off and flew into the night. David stood in the path, looking up at the sky as he tried to see his father’s car.

David eventually went back inside and found his mother, who tried to act normal and go about getting ready for the next day.

“Mom, is Dad going to be okay?” he asked her as he plopped down on the couch next to her.

“Of course he is. Your father is as stubborn as you are,” Sarah said, playfully tousling his hair. “Now you have school tomorrow, young man. Go brush your teeth, say your prayers, and let’s get ready for bed.”

“Yes, ma’am!” David slid off the couch and went to the bathroom to do as his mother instructed. After brushing his teeth, David stood beside his bed and said his bedtime prayers in Hebrew as he had been taught. “Lie us down, Adonai our God, in peace; and raise us up again, our Ruler in life. Shield us; remove from us every enemy pestilence, sword, famine, and sorrow. Remove all adversaries from before us and from behind us, and shelter us in the shadow of Your wings. For You are our guarding and saving God, a gracious and compassionate God and King. Guard our going out and our coming in for life and peace, now and always. God, please protect my father. Please guard him, please bring him home safely.” Tears running down his face, he climbed into bed and quickly fell fast asleep.

David was jerked out of sleep to the sound of sirens wailing. He glanced at the clock next to his bed; it read 4 a.m.

“Mom!” he screamed as he crawled out of bed to run to his parents’ room. “Mom! What’s going on?”

His mother sat on the side of the bed as she rubbed her eyes to wake up. “Calm down, little man,” she said. “Let’s go turn on the holonet and see if there’s any news, okay?”

David, even though a young child, still recognized when his parents were worried. His mother tried hard not to show it, as every good parent did, but this time, her hands trembled, her face was tight, and her voice was high-pitched as she tried to conceal the concern that weighed on her heart.

“Yes, Mother.” David obediently followed her to the living room as she turned on the holonet projector and changed the address to Canaan News Network. The projector quickly turned on, and the set of the news program filled half of the living room as if they were there in the studio watching the announcers.

“And we’re going to go live to President Nolan, ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer said as sound from the holonet projector filled the room. Jason Nolan was the President of the Terran Coalition, the super-national government of their republic.

The holoprojector switched to show the interior of an office, in which President Nolan was seated behind a desk. “Citizens of the Terran Coalition,” he said, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. David remembered vividly how scared the man looked. It was something he’d never seen before.

“This morning, we were attacked by an enemy that had been long since forgotten. Earth and the World Society have returned. We believe they are calling themselves the League of Sol, and over a thousand starships from the League’s military have attacked our capital. Those of you on Canaan have been warned by the emergency warning system reserved for major natural disasters, and I urge all citizens to remain in your homes. Do not go outside; do not get into your helicars. If you are a member of the Canaan militia, report to your muster station. Otherwise, stay inside. I know that citizens around the Terran Coalition and her member planets have many questions, and that fear is gripping us all as I speak these words.”

David had learned in school that humans had escaped from Earth after losing a war against nations who called themselves the World Society that wanted to stamp out religious belief and institute a communist system of government in the late twenty-first century. Over a hundred years after the initial refugees found the world of Canaan and established it, humans from that settlement began to spread out.

Nolan paused for a moment and took a drink of water. “But rest assured that the Coalition Defense Force is prepared and ready to meet any threat. As we speak, they are

holding the line against the League's attack while reinforcements from all nation-state militaries are proceeding at best possible speed to Canaan. As soon as we are able, we will brief the press on the exact events, but as this battle is currently being waged, I cannot go into more detail. At this point in time, I would like to ask everyone on Canaan and in the Terran Coalition to pray for the safety our service members fighting the League, for victory against them, and for God to protect the Terran Coalition in this dire hour."

Three hundred years after the landfall on Canaan, there were now dozens of human-controlled planets within the Terran Coalition. Each planet had its own government, constitution, military, and cultural customs. There was also an overarching constitution and government that handled external matters and policed disputes between the planets that made up the Terran Coalition. David's family was from the planet of New Israel; since Levi was stationed on Canaan, however, his family lived planet-side on Canaan.

David looked at his mother, who watched with rapt attention, her eyes wide and mouth open. "Our republic has overcome much in its history. We will not fall now, and we will not surrender. Regardless of what happens today, we will fight on. For now, may God bless you, and may God continue to bless the Terran Coalition."

"The crazy thing is, I can repeat that speech Nolan gave, almost verbatim, it was so seared into my mind," David said. "We sat there for an hour watching the holoprojector, until my mother made me do my schoolwork."

"I was nineteen and in college the day it happened. I'll never forget sitting around the holo with a bunch of

classmates, shaking with fear, crying, trying to reach our parents. It took weeks for life to return to any kind of normalcy."

"I'm not sure our lives every really returned to normal."

"Why?" Ellison asked.

"It started when they came to tell us Dad had died."

David thought back to how they had watched another news broadcast that announced the Terran Coalition's victory over the League forces. After it had finished, he looked to his mother.

"But what about Dad?" David asked, tears welling up in his eyes.

Sarah held him in her arms. "He's going to be fine, David. Let's pray for him, and then we'll fix lunch together, okay?"

David nodded somewhat lamely and hugged his mother back. "Okay, Mom."

The two of them made lunch, and the holonet projector remained off. As they sat down to the table to eat, a chime sounded throughout the house while a computerized voice announced, "You have a visitor at the front entryway."

Sarah glanced at the door with hesitation. "Stay here, David," she said to him, walking out of the dining room and into the foyer to open the front door. Disobeying, David trailed behind and watched with bated breath as she opened the door. Standing under the entryway were two CDF soldiers, both wearing what David recognized as dress uniforms. As soon as Sarah opened the door and processed what was happening, she screamed, "No! No! No! No!" as she fell into a chair by the front door.

David rushed to her, not sure what was going on. Sarah grabbed David and pulled him to her, trying to cover his ears

so he could not hear them.

"Mrs. Cohen, I regret to inform you that your husband, Major Levi Cohen, was killed in action," the soldier on the right said. As he spoke, his voice broke and tears rolled down his face; the other soldier, who had the *payes*, or curled sidelocks of a rabbi, had tears in his eyes as well.

"No...." Sarah's voice trailed off. Finally, she looked up. "How?" she asked, unable to finish her question.

"The ship your husband commanded was destroyed in combat, ma'am," the soldier on the right said. "May we come in?"

Numbly, Sarah nodded and stood to close the door behind the two men. The two soldiers joined Sarah in the living room after she sent David to his room. For the next few minutes, the soldiers attempted to console her with little success. Unable to give her the information she so desperately wanted, the two eventually departed after the rabbi prayed with them.

That afternoon, Sarah made several holocalls once she could compose herself. Friends of the family began to arrive, along with the rabbi of the synagogue their family had attended. As there was no body, there was also no funeral service, per Jewish law. The next morning, David helped his mother to prepare for shiva, the traditional Jewish mourning period of seven days. He couldn't quite understand why his dad wasn't coming home. At night, he cried out to God, asking Him why his father couldn't have been spared. When news reports had started to name Levi, Sarah would always turn them off, but David had gone online and found that his father's ship had rammed the League flagship leading the invasion. That was even harder for him to accept, the idea that his father chose to leave them.

A few days into the shiva period, there was a visitor that David didn't recognize. He was a tall, striking CDF soldier

who radiated pride in his dress uniform. As he entered the home and introduced himself to David's mother, David observed that he wore the flag of the Saudi Arabian state on his uniform.

"Mrs. Cohen," the man said in a deep baritone voice. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am First Lieutenant Issa El-Amin. I served with your husband during the battle of Canaan onboard the CSV *Salamis*."

Sarah teared up as he spoke. "Thank you for coming, Lieutenant," she said, her voice breaking.

"Levi asked me to visit you and your son. He asked me to tell you how much he loved you both." Sarah sobbed as El-Amin continued to speak. "I know my words are of little comfort, but he felt he had to do what he did to save you, to save us all."

David looked at El-Amin. "What did he do?"

El-Amin's gaze shifted to David. "Your father saved us all. In all my years, I've never seen a braver or more selfless act. He knew what would happen when he rammed that butcher's ship, and yet, he still did it."

David had cried so much, he didn't have many more tears in him, but at the description of his father's death, he and Sarah cried again. "You should be proud of him. You will see him again in paradise, *Inshallah*," El-Amin said, finishing with a traditional Arabic expression for "God willing."

Sarah took Issa's hands in hers and gripped them. "Thank you for coming to tell me this."

El-Amin bowed his head. "It was my honor and privilege. *Almashi mae Allah*...walk with God."

After a few minutes, El-Amin took his leave of them. Sarah, David, and the rest of the family continued to sit shiva. After seven days, shiva ended; the friends that came went back to their normal lives. David and his mother slowly began to continue on. There was no normal; the pain didn't

disappear. Thirty days after his father's death, the rabbi held a memorial service. At Sarah's insistence, it was not a major event, only a small gathering held at the family's synagogue.

DAVID LOOKED BACK UP at Ellison with a sigh. "I'm not sure I'll ever get over losing him. Throughout my childhood, all I ever heard was that my father was a hero, that he was an incredible man. I just wanted him back. I wanted to see him walk down our driveway, pick me up one more time, watch my parents embrace one more time." As he spoke, tears streamed down his face.

"David, you have some seriously unresolved trauma from your childhood. Would you consider working with me? We could have sessions remotely once you go back to the front."

"I'm not sure it's the right thing for me... I'm a man now. I need to act like it," David said.

"Please? There's nothing wrong with having to deal with your emotions. It will help you in the long run, I promise."

"I'll think about it."

"Okay. Our time is up for today, but I will put an appointment on your schedule for next week."

David quickly stood; he wanted to get out of the office and away from this counselor as fast as he could. *I hate thinking about all the pain. Better to just bury it and move on*, he thought.

"Thank you, Amy," he said with a forced smile.

"Of course, David. I hope I'm able to help in some way."

David nodded. "Good day," he said and walked out of the office as rapidly as he could.

3

A WEEK LATER, repairs on the *Artemis* were finally completed, and the ship was back under way. In the three weeks she had been away from the carrier battle group she was assigned to, the fighting in her patrol sector had died down, leaving David with time to deal with his thoughts. More than once, he woke up in the middle of the night during a nightmare, hitting his head on the rack above him. He experienced the battle over and over in his mind, reliving killing the League soldiers and the death of Beckett. As the nightmares got to David more and more, he decided to have another session with Amy.

I should just be able to move on, David thought as he sent a communication to the email address Amy had left him, requesting a session. *I am so ashamed of myself.*

A couple of days after sending the message, he had a session time set up and secured use of a private room on the *Artemis*. Sitting down at the small desk in the cramped room, David reluctantly engaged the video link. Ellison's smiling face appeared on the tablet he held a moment later.

"David, how are you today?"

"I'm okay, Counselor."

"David, this is not a formal setting."

“I apologize. I’m used to having to address everyone formally,” David said as he cracked a small smile.

“I’m glad you decided to continue our discussion. I want to help you get through the trauma you’ve experienced.”

I will be fine…I don’t need help, ran through David’s mind. “Where do we start?” he asked, working to ignore the thoughts in his head.

“Last time we spoke, you told me about your father’s passing. What happened after that? How did you deal with the pain?”

“After we had the memorial service for my father— as there was no body, we couldn’t have a funeral under Jewish law— I tried to bury my emotions. In time, the pain faded. I put my focus into my studies at the Hebrew school I attended.”

“I’m sure you received a lot of unwanted attention after what happened.”

“I heard hundreds, thousands of times, what a hero my father was. My classmates revered me. I wanted nothing to do with it.”

“Why not?”

David paused, trying to force his innermost thoughts out. “I just wanted my dad back. I wanted a normal life with my family. Instead, we have day in, day out, year in, year out war. For the last eleven years, I’ve watched it all play out. There were times it looked like the League was going to beat us, but we clawed our way back. There were times it looked like we would win, but the League just kept coming. They blather on with propaganda about how they want to free us from our superstitions. I may be just nineteen, but I’m smart enough to know a pile of crap when I see it.”

“You sound very passionate about that, David. I don’t quite understand how you can feel so strongly, yet I read in

your file that you attempted to obtain a conscientious objector deferment to the draft?"

"Amy," he said, invoking her name to emphasize his point, "I have no objection to serving my country. It's my duty. I just didn't want to kill people. Do you have any idea how easy it was to kill those League soldiers? I squeezed the trigger on a weapon, and they fell over like bowling pins. It shouldn't be that simple. It shouldn't be easy. I just wanted to do my duty, and then follow my calling in life to become a rabbi."

"You can still do that, David. You just have to forgive yourself. You did nothing wrong; you defended yourself and the two soldiers under your command."

"Not well enough. Private Beckett is dead. On my watch. Under my command."

"So you blame yourself for his death as well?"

"Yes. I shouldn't have tried to be a hero."

"Major Pipes believes you saved his ship."

"Good for him."

Amy paused for a moment. "What do you want, David?"

"I want to be a man of peace. I want to try, in some small way, to make this universe a better place."

"I might say that you made the universe a better place by saving Major Pipes' ship."

David closed his eyes for a moment. "Then why do I wake up seeing those dead Leaguers in my dreams at night?"

"Because most of us aren't equipped to handle killing our fellow humans in close quarters without it causing significant emotional trauma. And those it doesn't affect tend to have some form of mental disorder that prevents them from being in touch with their feelings."

David shook his head. "Right now, I almost wish I had one of those disorders."

“Trust me, you don’t.” Amy smiled before asking her next question. “What about boot camp? What happened to you once you were denied the draft deferment?”

“I took the oath…” David said, his mind trailing off to remember the day after his eighteenth birthday when he attended the ceremony to take the CDF Oath of Service. He’d known for years that the draft was coming as it had been enacted when he was thirteen years old. Thinking back to his vow to become a rabbi, he stood in line with dozens of other young men and women, patiently waiting for the sergeant-at-arms to start the ceremony.

“Good afternoon, recruits. We are gathered here today as you take your first steps to becoming young soldiers in the Coalition Defense Force. Each of you has passed your entry physical exam, been provided with a military occupation, and received your orders to basic training. Now raise your right hand and repeat after me.”

David raised his right hand and repeated the oath as directed. “I, David Cohen, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the Terran Coalition against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, and that I will obey the orders of the President of the Terran Coalition and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.”

With the oath behind him, David was a soldier. He spent one more night at home with his mother, who, with the pride of a military mother, threw a party to see him off, but David’s heart lacked the pride that his mother’s held. As he’d just graduated from secondary school, he didn’t feel ready to

go away for four years, but he knew that it was his duty to do so, as so many had fought before him.

After pulling up to the recruit training center for the CDF on Canaan the next day, David stepped onto the transport craft packed with sixty young men and women. Little was said amongst the recruits on the hours-long journey from the city to the military base as the young adults all waited with naïve eagerness for what would happen next. It was early the following morning when the transport craft pulled into the docking bay.

A drill instructor in a crisply pressed uniform, one who didn't seem fazed by the time of morning, stormed onboard. "Let's go! Let's go! Move it! Get off my transport, ladies! Sleep time is over! Welcome to the CDF!"

David awkwardly stood and made his way forward with the rest of the teenagers, falling into their first formation as directed by the drill instructors. Once in formation and separated, men on one side and women on the other, a tall, burly drill instructor stood in front of the formations. The recruits stood at attention simply out of fear and awaited their next command, trying not to be last or too slow.

"Attention, recruits! Welcome to recruit training station Lancaster. This is where you will become trained soldiers of the CDF."

The drill instructors paced between the ranks of recruits looking for someone to flinch, to remove a hair from their face, or scratch an itch. David stood motionless like a mannequin, trying not to attract attention.

"Staff Sergeant! Did you tell this recruit he could yawn?" a drill instructor asked, regarding the heavyset teenager standing in the front of the formation.

"Absolutely not!" the big man in front barked.

"Recruit... do you need a nap?" the drill instructor screamed at the scared recruit next to David.

“Uh, no, sir!”

“Drop down and give me ten pushups, recruit!”

The teenager fell to his knees, but had trouble getting through the pushups required. After five, he lay in the dirt.

“Oh, look here. Momma’s fat biscuit-eater is out of shape. Keep pushing, recruit!”

After a moment, the recruit finished out the pushups and was roughly returned to his place in line.

“As I was saying,” the drill instructor said, “when we tell you to, you will pick up your belongings, file off, starting with the front row, and go straight into the room to your right. Women, to the left. The drill instructor at the front of the room will provide you further instruction. File off!”

With that command, each recruit picked up their belongings and quickly followed in the person to their right to complete processing. Everyone was fitted for camouflage fatigues, and as that occurred, their civilian clothes were packed in their bags, tagged and gathered. Finally, heads were shaved, and they were organized into companies.

As David went through each section of processing, an array of thoughts flooded through him. *My father chose to do this. Did he know what he was in for?*

It took several hours to get through all of the processing stations. By the time he finished, David just wanted to go home. *God, please help me get through this*, he kept repeating to himself. Finally, the recruits were reassembled and David sat with one hundred and sixty others, with a shaved head and poorly fitting fatigues, listening to the senior drill instructor introduce himself.

“Sit up straight! Stop slouching! Act like soldiers!” A short, brutally imposing man with a nametag that read “Salazar” said at the top of his lungs in a raspy voice. To David, it seemed like the man had been doing this his entire adult life.

“Sir, yes, sir!” the company responded in a completely non-cohesive manner.

“My name is Staff Sergeant Macro Salazar. I am your senior drill instructor. My mission is to train you maggots to become soldiers in the Coalition Defense Force.” Salazar thundered. “A soldier in the Coalition Defense Force is a person who possesses the highest of virtue, obeys lawful orders, shows respect to his fellow soldiers and seniors, and strives to be the absolute best at anything he attempts. Spirit, discipline, and courage are at the core of everything that he does!”

Salazar strolled around the bay as he spoke. “Each of you may earn the right to be called a soldier, and I will give everything of myself to train you, even after you give up on yourself. From now on, I will be with you every single day, everywhere you go, and I will instruct you on how to do everything that you need to learn to be a soldier in the Coalition Defense Force.”

Pausing for a moment, Salazar turned toward them and glared. “I have told you what I will do for you. Now I will tell you what I expect from you. No one will quit, You will give one hundred percent of yourselves at all times. You will obey all orders quickly and without hesitation. You will never give up. Do these things, and you may earn the title of Coalition Defense Force soldier. Now stand up!”

Jumping to his feet with the rest of the recruits, David marched in place as he was instructed.

“Attention on deck! Right face! Forward, march, recruits!”

With that, the recruits halted, turned to the right, and filed out of the bay with the drill instructors barking orders at them from the top of their lungs.

As David finished relating the memory to Ellison, she looked genuinely sympathetic. “I was too old to be called up when the draft was instituted, David… I don’t have a frame of reference for it.”

“Boot camp itself wasn’t that bad. It was what happened when the drill instructors found out who my father was… I was an easy target,” David said.

“How did you cope with that?” Ellison asked.

“By trying to stay off their radar as much as I could.”

“Could you tell me about it?”

David thought back to his first drill formation, standing at attention outside of the recruit barracks.

Salazar’s voice as he walked down the line of recruits flooded back into David’s mind. “And why did you join the Coalition Defense Force?” he asked in his raspy voice.

“I was drafted, sir!”

“You were drafted…you didn’t volunteer? Do you not want to serve your country?”

“Sir, I do want to serve my country, sir!” David responded with confidence.

“Are you contradicting me, recruit?”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“Are you confused, recruit? Because you did contradict me!”

A female recruit behind David snickered at his predicament. Salazar immediately turned his attention to her. “Do you think I’m funny, recruit?”

“Sir, no, sir!” she shouted.

“Drop down and give me twenty-five!”

The teenager dropped down into position and counted off her twenty-five push-ups.

“One, two, three, four,” she said, laboring harder with each rep.

Once completed, the young recruit ran back into formation as Salazar returned his ire to David. “Now, do you want to serve your country?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” David shouted back.

“Do you think you’re special? Did your daddy fly his ship into the side of a League battleship or something?”

“Sir, I don’t think I’m special, but my father did fly his ship into the side of a League battleship, sir!”

Salazar stared at him for a second. “Well, no shit,” he said, momentarily taken off guard. “So you’re that David Cohen?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“You do think you’re special, then! Drop down and give me fifty pushups, recruit!”

As David dropped to the ground to do the pushups, he saw the smirk on Salazar’s face. *Oh great. Ten weeks of this guy busting my balls because of my father. That’s just awesome.*

Fifty painful pushups later, David finished the count and Salazar ordered him to his feet. “I’ve got my eye on you, maggot. Back in line!”

Walking down the line of recruits, he stopped in front of another young woman. “And why are you here?”

“To, uh, figure out my life path, sir!” she got out nervously.

“Do I look like a life guide to you, recruit? Do I look like your mommy?”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“Lucky for you, I am a life guide! I will lead; you will follow! You will do exactly as I instruct you at all times. Do you understand me, recruit?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“I don’t think you do! Drop down and give me twenty-five pushups!”

Walking back around to the front of the line, Salazar continued his monologue. “Now give me a battle cry!”

The body of recruits yelled out a cry that was mostly ineffectual. “That was pathetic!” Salazar barked. “Sergeants! Give them a proper demonstration of a CDF battle cry!”

The two drill instructors picked an unlucky recruit to scream at in both his ears. *“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”* they shouted at the top of their lungs.

“Now try it again, recruits!” Salazar said.

Again, the recruits screamed out a cry much louder than the last, but nowhere near what the two drill instructors had managed.

“It’s still pathetic! You wouldn’t scare a small dog with that noise. Never mind, I’ll fix that in the next ten weeks, and I will turn you filthy civilians into lean, mean fighting machines. Now fall in. We’re going for a run, ladies!”

Ellison laughed as David finished retelling the story of his first drill formation. “Your drill instructor sounds like…well, a colorful character, David.”

David laughed with her. “The truth is, even though at first I couldn’t stand him, by the end of the ten weeks, I had grown to respect Staff Sergeant Salazar greatly. In fact, I doubt I’d be alive today if I hadn’t been given the training I received at his direction.”

“I’m glad the experience ended up being positive for you, then.”

“Me too.”

“I’m afraid we’re almost out of time.”

“Communications credits do come at a premium these days,” David said. “Thank you. Just talking about all this does make it somewhat better.”

“Good. Let’s do it again soon, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Amy,” she reminded him with a smile.

“Yes, Amy.”

“God bless, and Godspeed, David.”

“Godspeed.”

4

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, David was cleared to return to full duty. His presence had been requested by the commanding officer of the *Artemis*, Major Pipes. David had been told he was up for a commendation for his performance during the boarding action, but inside, he didn't want the recognition. Walking up to the hatch to the CO's office, he knocked on the rim, as it was open.

"Come in, Corporal!" boomed Pipes.

David walked into the office and braced to attention. "Corporal David Cohen, reporting as ordered, sir!"

"At ease, Corporal. Take a seat."

Across from the major, David sat ramrod straight in the nearest chair and locked his eyes forward. Retreating to what he had learned in boot camp seemed to provide some comfort.

"Corporal, I wanted to speak with you earlier, but I was asked to wait awhile until you were cleared by the counselor. How're you doing?"

David furrowed his brow. That was a loaded question, but he sensed Major Pipes had genuine concern for his wellbeing. "I'm...okay, sir."

“Killing someone, even the enemy, isn’t an easy thing, son,” Pipes said, a look of concern on his face.

“No, sir, it’s not. I never wanted to kill another person. I just wanted to do my duty for four years, and then continue my religious studies.”

“Ah yes.” Pipes nodded to the flag of New Israel on David’s uniform shoulder. “Orthodox, yes?”

David nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Corporal, I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you to find out what your father did for the Terran Coalition. I understand you feel the best path for you is to be a rabbi, but I’d like you to consider the possibility of a different calling in life.”

David raised an eyebrow. “Sir?”

“You have clear command ability, son. Even though you lack advanced training in small arms combat, your first instinct was to rush to the sound of the guns. Furthermore, once there, you made the right calls throughout the engagement.”

David looked away. “With respect, sir, I had no business trying to fight off a League boarding party. I don’t know what was going through my head. I don’t know why I made the choices I did. I guessed, and my guesses cost a good man his life. He’ll never go home. He was under my command. It was my job to keep him safe.”

Pipes leaned forward in his chair. “Corporal, I can see all over your face that you blame yourself for what happened. You can’t do that. The League is the reason Private Beckett is dead. Let me tell you something… if you really guessed your way through that engagement, then I’m even more impressed because you innately made the right calls.”

David forced himself to look back at Pipes. “Thank you, sir, but I’m struggling to make peace with the fact that I

killed a bunch of people. It shouldn't be so easy to do that. It's not right."

Pipes stood up from behind his desk and walked around it to sit down next to David. "No, it's not right. But it's something that soldiers like us have to deal with. It follows us around and it's a constant companion."

"How do you make peace with it, sir?"

"You don't, and if you ever become okay with killing someone else, then something very wrong has happened to you. It's supposed to hurt; it's supposed to be painful. But if we don't kill them, they'll kill us. And after they do, they'll kill our wives, our mothers, our families, and our children. So we stand on the line and ensure it doesn't happen."

Pipes put his hand on David's shoulder. "Son, you've got a gift to command. You're good at this, better than many others I have seen in my career. If you'd like, I'll sponsor you for officers' candidate school. We need more people like you out here or we won't win this war."

David shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I have no desire to be an officer, nor to continue in the CDF after I have completed my required service."

Pipes nodded, a small frown evident on his face. "I understand, son. If that should change, I'd be glad to recommend you at any time. I have something else for you." He paused for a moment, stood up, and retrieved a case from his desk. "Please stand, Corporal." Once David stood, he snapped the medal case open and showed it to David. "I am pleased to award you the Bronze Star with the V device for your actions in defense of this ship." After closing the case, he handed it to David. "We'll hold a formal ceremony later, but I wanted you to have this."

"Thank you, sir," David said, unable to really say anything else.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me, Corporal,” Pipes said, his easy smile returned.

“Yes, sir.”

“Carry on, Corporal.”

David stood quickly and braced to attention. “Yes, sir!”

David took his time walking back to his bunk, wrestling with the CO’s offer. What if he *was* good at being a soldier? That thought haunted him. He didn’t want to be good at killing people. *I know my calling is to be a rabbi*, he thought, looking up at the top of his bunk. *What if Major Pipes is right?*

David turned over and tried to go sleep, but found no rest.

The next few months passed quickly for David on board the *Artemis*. He’d returned to his duties and split time between damage control and backup helm operator. Focusing on his responsibilities and with a couple more sessions with Amy, he was able to work through the emotional toll of his first combat encounter. Over time, the nightmares faded, and he returned to some level of normalcy. The conversation he had with Major Pipes, however, refused to leave his mind. He lay awake many nights in his bunk, thinking over his choices in life.

The ship’s alarm klaxon blared, jerking David out of his thoughts. “Attention, all hands, this is the commanding officer. Man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations!” The voice of Major Pipes rang out from the ship’s intercom.

Jumping out of his bunk, David made his way to his assigned damage control station, where Rachel Munford already waited for him.

“Ready to go, Munford?” David asked as he pulled the fireproof hood to his suit down and over his head.

Munford nodded. “Yes, Corporal. Ready to go.” Munford’s wounds had healed, though David knew she was still greatly affected by Beckett’s death, even more so than David.

The first few minutes of the engagement passed with nothing more than some shocks and rumbles. Both David and Munford were knocked off their feet when the ship took a sudden major hit. The intercom on David’s personal communicator chimed.

“This is the bridge. We need damage control teams and medical staff immediately,” shouted a voice David didn’t recognize.

David glanced at Munford. “We’re only one deck down. Let’s get up there and try to help.”

She nodded in return. “Aye, aye, Corporal.”

They both made their way to the bridge as fast as possible. The two sentries that normally stood watch were trying to open the hatch, but it was stuck hard. Using the specialized tools they carried, David and Munford pried the doors open and stepped through.

Before him, David saw a perfect storm of destruction. The XO’s chair had a beam lying across it, pinning the woman it contained to the seat. Several stations were destroyed, and a fire crackled in one of the substation control units. He surveyed the situation methodically, as he had now done many times. “Munford, help me get this beam off of her.” he said, rushing to the XO.

Grunting, they picked up the beam and lifted it off the chair, revealing the trauma sustained by the collapse. David knelt, feeling for a pulse, but they were too late. Looking at Munford, he shook his head. Performing the same duty on Major Pipes, he was relieved to find that while the major had been knocked unconscious, his pulse was strong and steady.

David put his commlink to his mouth and spoke into it. “This is Corporal Cohen on the bridge. We still need medical

personnel immediately and additional damage control teams. All bridge officers are incapacitated. We need someone to come take command here."

Looking back around the bridge, David heard a cry for help coming from the navigation and helm station. Making his way over, he saw the ship's navigator, Second Lieutenant Naomi Caldwell, a woman that he had met several times before. She struggled to stand with a piece of shrapnel lodged in her chest.

"Lieutenant, hold still," David said.

As David knelt beside her, Caldwell reached up and grabbed his arm. "Corporal, you have to get the ship to safety," she said in her slight Afro-Caribbean accent, gasping for air.

"Let me help you..." David said, frantically scanning the room for the emergency medical kit panel.

"No! Forget me. Save this ship or we'll all be dead," she said as loud and as clear as she could. Just then, another round of weapon impacts underlined her point.

"What do I do?" David asked with panic in his voice as he glanced back toward Caldwell, caught between wanting to run away and doing his duty. He didn't want to see yet another person die in front of him. He wasn't sure if he could handle that again.

"The Lawrence drive is charged. You have to enter the coordinates and engage."

"Where should we go?"

"Anywhere but here, Corporal," Caldwell said. He took it as an attempt at gallows humor.

David cleared the debris away from the navigation console and stared at it. He had basic training in how to use the helm and navigation consoles but had never actually executed a Lawrence drive jump. He picked a space station near their location that he hoped would have medical and

engineering personnel, and entered the coordinates into the navigation system. When the drive was ready a few seconds later, he engaged it.. Through the transparent metal windows directly to the front of the bridge, he watched in fasciation as the multi-colored maw of the artificial wormhole opened. While he'd seen them before in books and videos, there was something different about seeing it in person, a few kilometers away. *Even in the middle of all this death and destruction, the beauty of God's creation is all around us.* The frigate rocketed forward, speeding through the tunnel between points in space and thanks to his lack of piloting skills, the ride was extremely rough.

Caldwell's breaths became more labored as the ship exited the wormhole. "Are we safe, Corporal?" she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Let me get help…"

As David turned to get the woman help, her eyes closed as her breathing slowly came to a stop. David sprang up and rushed to the panel of emergency supplies, fumbling to get it open as the medical personnel rushed into the bridge.

"The navigator is down…she needs medical treatment now!"

One of the medical technicians knelt beside Caldwell, feeling for her pulse and examining the wound in her chest. He used a portable defibrillation wand on her chest without effect. After a few more minutes of trying to revive her, he looked up. "I'm sorry, but she's gone. There's no coming back from that kind of a wound, Corporal."

As the technician turned away to treat another member of the bridge crew who was still alive, David felt his knees go wobbly. He sat down on the chair next to the navigator's body.

I've got to keep it together he thought, looking down at her lifeless form. For the second time in six months, David found

himself saying the traditional prayer for the dead. Quietly, and in Hebrew, he recited it from memory. “God, filled with mercy, dwelling in the heavens heights, bring proper rest beneath the wings of Your Angels, amid the ranks of the holy and the pure, illuminating like the brilliance of the skies the souls of our beloved and our blameless who went to their eternal place of rest.”

Munford came up behind David, and said in a voice that was a whisper, “Corporal, are you okay?”

Snapped out of his thoughts, he looked up at her with anguish written on his face. “No…but we have a job to do.” He stood and forced one foot in front of the other. “Let’s get back to it.”

5

THAT NIGHT, David took a long shower, also known as a Hollywood shower by those in the CDF. The term traced back hundreds of years; to where, David wasn't quite sure. It referred to taking a long shower while in space, as opposed to a space shower, in which you turned the water on for thirty seconds, turned it off, lathered up, and finally turned it back on again to rinse. His bunk was thankfully quiet and empty due to the rest of the men assigned to that berthing compartment being absent, finally giving him time to think. The idea of being a part of something larger than himself embodied the motto of the CDF, which was *"Semper Paratus"* or "Always Ready." If he was being honest with himself, it appealed to him.

Lying in his bunk, he pondered over and over. *What do I owe the Terran Coalition? Do I owe it anything? Does everyone have a duty to stand up for the freedoms we've received and fight against evil?*

Finding no solace, he decided to place a real-time comm call to a friend from boot camp, Sheila Thompson. It would cost his entire comm time ration for the next three months, but he had to talk to someone, and his mother wasn't the right person to have this conversation with. As he reached

for his tablet his mind thought back to boot camp, where he met Sheila three days into the ten-week ordeal.

David was in the middle of doing his laundry when a girl walked up to him as she washed her own clothes. He'd seen her a few times but hadn't spoken to her.

"David Cohen, right?" she asked.

David stared at her. "Who's asking?"

"Look, I've seen you getting yelled at and PTed a lot the last few days. I thought you might want some advice."

David relaxed just a tad. "Well, I am tired of being yelled at. What's your advice?"

"The first thing is...lose the chip off your shoulder. It's big enough that you're visibly weighted down by it."

David's shoulders went forward, and his face tightened into a snarl. "What are you talking about?"

"See? That. You're proving my point. I get it, your dad was the hero. You probably hate being reminded about it. But you can't show it. Right now, you do just enough to stay on the drill instructor's radar and he's going to pound you into the ground until you quit pissing him off. There are plenty of people that are going to screw up far worse than you here... let them do it and lie low."

The girl's words made sense to David. "How do you know all this? Is your dad a big shot in the CDF?"

"My parents are lawyers. They don't even want me here."

David raised an eyebrow. "That's interesting. What's your name?"

"Sheila. Sheila Thompson."

David extended his hand. "David Cohen, nice to meet you."

“Likewise,” Sheila said as she took her dry clothes out of the dryer and began to fold them. “You don’t seem to be very excited to be here.”

“I’m not. I want to be done with my enlistment, do my duty to the Terran Coalition, and then I’m going to go off and become a rabbi.”

“A rabbi?” she asked, her nose scrunching up as she made a silly face.

“You know, a teacher. A clergyman. Like a pastor for Christians or an imam for Muslims.”

“I know what a rabbi is. I didn’t grow up under a rock. I don’t understand why you’d want to be one.”

“Because I’ve no desire to kill people, Sheila. I’d rather try to teach them to be better.”

“Sometimes evil has to be opposed. When we’re up against a group as evil as the League, the only way to do that is by force of arms,” she said with conviction.

“I get that, but that person isn’t me. I’m going to do my duty; I owe the Terran Coalition a four-year stint. After that, I’m out. What about you?”

“I’m making a career out of it.”

“Why?” David asked.

“I might change my mind later, I suppose, but it’s what I feel I need to do with my life. My parents want me to go to law school, but I am completely uninterested in doing that.”

“You could be in the military and be a lawyer. That’s what the JAG Corps is, right?”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “I’m not joining the military to be a lawyer. I want to be on the sharp tip of the spear. I tried out for the flight academy, but I didn’t score high enough on CVAB. I only got seventy-fifth percentile.”

“Only.”

Sheila laughed. “You’re not half bad once you crawl out of that shell, Mr. Cohen.”

David smirked. “Do I look like an officer to you?”

“No, but I will be in a couple of years,” Sheila said with a grin.

“How’s that?”

“I already have my degree. I did most of it in high school and finished up the last year while on draft deferment. I want to serve as an enlisted soldier for two years, and then go to officers’ candidate school. Eventually, I want to command a starship.”

“I’d say you have it all planned out.”

“I think I do. But I doubt my plans will survive first contact with life.”

“So do you just sit around reading books about the military? Because I recognized that one. Some general once said that ‘no plan survives first contact with the enemy’.”

Sheila rolled her eyes again. “As a matter of fact, yes. I’ve read many books about the military.”

David cracked a grin. “It shows. We better get these clothes finished up before the DIs come back in here and make us do push-ups again.”

“Look who’s suddenly being responsible and not trying to annoy the drill instructors.”

“Hey, I know good advice when I hear it.”

David smiled at the memory as he pulled out his tablet and went to the vidlink function, keying on Sheila’s name. Her icon showed active, much to his relief. He pressed the button to start a long-distance link, and a few seconds later, her face popped up.

“David, is that you?” she asked with a huge smile on her face.

“David Cohen, the man, the myth, the moron… at your service.”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “I told you to quit making fun of yourself.”

“Old habits die hard. Besides, if I make fun of myself, I’m less likely to be made fun of for my dad’s heroics or whatever it is I’m a target for being hazed on this week. When I was first assigned to the *Artemis*, I got sent around the ship for two hours looking for a cable stretcher.”

“A cable stretcher? It took you two hours to figure out that was a prank?” Sheila said with a wry grin and an arched eyebrow.

His cheeks turned bright red. “Well…for some reason, it made sense at the time.”

“If it makes you feel better, they got me with hydraulic blinker fluid.”

David laughed out loud. “That’s great.”

“Watch it, Mr. Cohen.”

“I’m still not an officer.”

“Yeah, but somehow you got to Corporal before I did.”

David shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, I’m not sure why.”

“Might have something to do with you going all John Wayne and taking out half a League combat brigade.”

David gave her a hard look. “One…I was promoted before that. Two…I’m still not okay with killing those people.”

“I know. What’s on your mind?”

“We were in another battle today.”

“You wiped out another League combat brigade?”

David shook his head. “No…our XO was killed in action. Along with the navigator. She died right next to me after helping me to move the ship to safety. All she cared about was saving the rest of us…even with a metal bar going through her chest.”

Sheila frowned, her lips pursing together. “I’m so sorry, David. I didn’t realize.”

David shrugged his shoulders. “It’s war. I get it. It’s not going to be the last time I see someone die when I’m posted to the front lines.” He paused for a moment, wrinkling his forehead. “I’m beginning to think that maybe Major Pipes was right.”

“You mean in asking you to go to OCS?”

“Yes.”

“Why? When we talked about it last, you were really adamant that you wanted out of the CDF.”

“I know…I’m just… I wonder if maybe I’m just running away. It’s easy to run away. It’s not easy to stand up and fight. My father used to say that there are three types of people: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs. He’d say that sheep are the majority of people, good and moral, without a capability to commit violence. Wolves, though, have a thirst for violence and prey on the sheep. Sheepdogs, on the other hand, have the ability to commit violence, but only do so to protect the sheep from the wolves. Dad… was a sheepdog. He ran toward danger, served for twenty years, and I don’t think he feared anyone or anything.”

“So now you’re feeling that it might make sense to stay in?”

“If Major Pipes is right and I do have what he calls natural leadership ability… maybe there’s a way I can help win the war. If we win, that stops the killing. Right?”

“David, if you’re looking for absolution, I can’t give it to you. I can only tell you that I know a life of service in defense of my country is what I need to do, at least today and for the foreseeable future. You’re the only one that can decide if it’s what you need to do.”

“Good advice as always.”

Sheila smiled. “I ought to charge you for it.”

“We did promise to stay in touch…after spending boot camp looking out for one another. Especially that final exercise. That thing was brutal. Forced march throughout the night, live fire exercises… the League has nothing on our drill instructors.”

Sheila laughed. “Yeah, I’ll give you that. Hey, no matter what you decide, David, you’ve got nothing to prove. It’s your life. Your choice. Okay?”

David nodded. “I guess I’ve just got a big choice to make.”

“It sounds like you do.”

“Okay, I’m going to get off this thing before I burn up an entire year’s worth of communications credits.”

“Take care, David. Be safe. Shalom.”

David cracked a smile. “Shalom.” With the press of a button, her face disappeared.

David put the tablet away and stared at the top of his bunk, repeatedly running through the decision he faced in his mind. *I’ve got to do this. I don’t know exactly why, but I can’t turn away from it*, he thought as he finally made a choice. He pulled up his personal pad and brought up the mail application. Quickly composing a message to the acting XO, he requested a follow-up meeting with Major Pipes. Then he turned over and went to sleep, rest finding him.

THE NEXT DAY, David went about his normal duties, and as the day crept by, he wondered if he’d blown his chance with Major Pipes. Perhaps he had closed that door when he rejected him the first time, but as the end of the day neared, he was in the middle of his daily rounds checking on work orders when his personnel communicator buzzed. He looked down, opened it up, and saw that it was a message from Major Pipes, ordering him to the CO’s office posthaste.

David raced back to his locker, depositing his tools inside. He walked to the gravlift and took it to deck one, which housed Major Pipes' office and day cabin. Knocking on the closed hatch, he heard Pipes distinctive voice reply.

"Come!"

Opening the hatch and walking in, David brought himself to attention in front of the major's desk. "Corporal David Cohen reports as ordered, sir!"

"Corporal, I was surprised that you asked to see me after our last conversation."

"Sir, I've been thinking a lot about what you said the last time we spoke over the last few weeks."

The older man stared at him for a few moments. "Have a seat, Corporal." After David sat down, the major continued, "You seemed to make your feelings known the last time we sat together in my office. What changed?"

David looked Pipes straight in the eye. "Last week on the bridge, sir."

Furrowing his brow, Major Pipes nodded. "What about it?"

"The navigator died in front of me, sir. Her only concern was the ship and getting it to safety. That made an impact on me. I know that I'm young and I have much to learn, but I also know to the very core of my being that the League of Sol is evil. I believe that evil must be opposed. I can't run from that, and I can't run from what I'm good at. You were right; I'm good at this in spite of my desire not to be."

"Are you sure, Corporal? I don't want you to do it for a year and then get cold feet. If you're going to make a commitment, you've got to stick with it," Pipes said.

David nodded. "I understand, sir. I'm all in on this."

Pipes was silent for a few moments, leaving an uneasy silence in the office.

“It’s not an easy life, David. It’s not an easy life at all. There are days where you will regret it and wish you had chosen a different path. Especially on the days you go to bed alone in your bunk with no one at home waiting for you.”

“Sir, I’ve spent a lot of time considering just that. I’m sure. Even though I don’t like to admit it, I get tunnel vision in combat. I act. I’m able to focus on the problem at hand and logically think it through, even with the chaos around me. It seems like that might be a useful trait to bring to combat.”

“It’s possibly the most useful trait, to use your words, son. I knew you had it when I read the after-action report from the boarding.”

“I’m sorry I rejected your offer the first time, sir.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. This decision isn’t one to be made lightly.”

“Why’d you do it, sir?” David asked.

“I’d already joined the CDF prior to the Battle of Canaan. I thought it was going to be a place where I figured out what I wanted to do in life, gained some skills, and since I’d joined the reserve officers training cadre, they paid for my degree. Frankly, it seemed like a good deal at the time. After that dark day, I first wanted to get even. When that passed, I wanted to be sure that it never happened again. So here I am, twelve years later. Promoted to major and commanding a frigate. If you apply yourself, David, you can do the same. I think you could go far in the CDF, but most importantly, you’ve got something to offer. Don’t get a big head, always learn new things, and stay focused.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Above all, never stop trying to bring your crew home. Aside from defeating the enemy, that is your most important charge.”

“Yes, sir,” David said again.

“I’ll put in your application and sponsor it. Once I get word back, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, Corporal, I’m sure you have duties to attend to. Dismissed.”

David stood, braced to attention, and departed his office, mind racing as to what he’d gotten himself into now.

6

CSV *Audacious*
Patrol Sector 62E—Terran Coalition / League of Sol Active Combat Zone
5 February 2560 (Old Earth Calendar)

Sixteen years later, David Cohen walked into his cabin on the CSV *Audacious,* a Thane class escort carrier. He paused to strip off his rank insignia—now that of a major—and ribbons before taking off his khaki uniform shirt. *Two and a half years into my tour as the XO of this ship, and it seems like I'm just learning how to do the job well*. He took a seat on the small couch that occupied most of the space in the small living room space, pulling up fleetlink to review his personal communications. Scanning quickly through the videos and text messages he'd received during the day, he noticed a note from his detailer; the person assigned to place him and other officers into positions they'd hopefully excel at.

That's the idea anyway. I've always found my postings to be a bit random. I've gotten some good assignments, though, XO on this carrier among the best so far. Thinking back to his first

days on the carrier, David thought he was a good leader coming in to the role. Being forced to find creative solutions to problems he'd never encountered before, he'd learned how to work through issues in a manner that allowed the crew to thrive, and the ship to remain in tiptop shape. Pulling the note up, he had to read it twice for the full meaning to set in.

David,

How's the Audacious *treating you? Your recent FITREP was exceptional. It's opened many doors for the next posting in your career. I've got a unique opening for you to consider. The CSV* Yitzhak Rabin, *one of those next-generation Ajax class destroyers, is in need of a CO. Her current CO is retiring after twenty years in service, and the previously selected CO is suddenly not available. So… your name is at the top of my list. What do you say? I realize it's out of the blue, but I need an answer by 0800 CMT tomorrow morning.*

– Ronald

David sat back on the couch, absorbing the request that lay before him. *The circle is now complete. Once I take command of this ship, I'll have effectively traveled the same path my father did. Does that make me my father*? The idea that someday he'd command the same class of ship had occurred to him over the years, but to finally have it happen caused deep and latent feelings to roar to the surface. *How far I've come from a ruddy-faced teenager, to this. Dad would be proud.*

Over the years, he'd been able to compartmentalize the emotional side of his mind and had seen counselors after each major engagement as mandated by CDF medical personnel. Always making a conscious effort to internalize

most of his feelings, he didn't want to show what he perceived to be weakness. It led to a calm and focused exterior, but when the night was quiet and he lay in bed to sleep, he couldn't stop seeing the faces of the people he'd been forced to kill in the discharge of his duties, or those he couldn't save. It was an ever-present reminder of the cost of war.

He cross-referenced the name of the ship, the CSV *Yitzhak Rabin*. An Ajax class destroyer, she was one of the newest ships in the fleet. The Ajax class had been introduced three years ago to much fanfare; they packed the shield generators and weapons of a previous generation light cruiser and had performed exceptionally well against the League since their introduction. There were rumors around the CDF that the Matrinids, another friendly alien race in the local sector, had provided advanced shield technology, but David typically found RUMINT—the slang term for "rumor intelligence"—to be highly unreliable.

As he began to compose his reply to his detailer, he paused for a moment, considering the awesome responsibility of a starship command. Even his posting as the XO of *Audacious* was not the same. On the *Audacious*, while he ran the various departments of the ship and kept it humming along, the CO made the final decisions. At the end of the day, it was the CO's call, not his. For just a moment, one side of his brain thought, *Do you really want to decide life and death for four hundred and fifty people? Can you handle that?* While the other was sure and confident. *I've got this. After seventeen years of preparation, I'm ready to lead*. Lost in thought, David considered both thoughts. Ultimately, he believed he had a duty to fight the good fight, to use every talent he had to defeat the evil that was the League of Sol.

David finished his reply, thanking the detailer and accepting the assignment. He'd known for a while he was on

the command shortlist, but being offered command of a destroyer after one tour as an XO surprised him. Then again, the war clearly wasn't going that well. The joint chiefs were careful not to say it in public, and the military and government officials continued to play up the victories and downplay the defeats. But everyone on the front lines knew they were being dragged kicking and screaming to the gallows by the League's overwhelming superiority in numbers. The CDF still had a lot of fight in it, and they won more engagements than they lost...but it was only a matter of time.

David continued to hope that a new ally or new technology would help shift the tide of the war. The Terran Coalition had far superior shields, weapons, and propulsion technology, but it was only a generation or so better than the League's. It needed to be three generations ahead to truly turn the tide, as superiority of that magnitude would render League ships virtually unable target, damage or destroy CDF vessels in meaningful numbers. There was talk throughout the military about the Victory Project, a top-secret program to create a new ship class. *Command probably let that leak to keep up civilian morale, more than anything*.

Setting those thoughts aside, David hit send on his reply and then pulled up the crew roster for the *Rabin*. He immediately noticed that the XO's position was unfilled. *Well, well. I wonder*. He knew Sheila had been deep-selected by the promotion board for command as well. *Maybe she'd be interested in serving with me again*. David viewed her as a "fire and forget" missile; whatever needed to be done, just give it to her, and she'd make sure it happened. It would be good to see her again for more than just a quick lunch or dinner when travel plans happened to overlap every couple of years. Pulling up his mail application, David started to compose the letter to her, a smile creeping onto his face as he did so.

Sheila,

I hope this note finds you well. It's been a couple of weeks since I had time to write, but things have been so crazy. I was just offered command of an Ajax class destroyer, the CSV Yitzhak Rabin*. Are you sitting down? I hope so. The XO slot is open, and I know you're the second officer of a guided missile cruiser, but the XO on the* Rabin *was reassigned on an emergency basis just a couple of weeks ago. My detailer asked me if I could recommend someone, and you were the first and only person that came to mind. Would you like me to send him your way?*

– David

Captain Sheila Thompson walked into her stateroom onboard the CSV *Stromboli*, a Lepanto class guided missile cruiser, after pulling a double shift on the bridge, covering the first and second watch. Both the CO and XO were down with a nasty case of the flu, and as the second watch officer, it was left to her to pick up the slack. Right now, she was just ready for a hot bath followed by a private dinner, and hopefully, a good night's sleep before taking first shift again in the morning. As she ran the hot water for her bath, her tablet's flashing alert light caught her attention.

Unable to push the device to later, Sheila left the water running and went back to her desk to check for messages. Running her pointer finger over the biometrics screen, she unlocked her tablet. An email marked high importance from David caught her attention. Anxiety filled her as she clicked to open it. Part of her hated that he had the effect on her, but such had been the case for so long now, she was getting used

to it. The two colleagues had always kept up with each other over the years, usually having dinner together every once in a great while when they were on ships laid up at the main Canaan drydocks at the same time. She paused briefly by her desk to read the email.

Her emotions ran away with her as she read the message a second time just to be sure of what it said. Her tour on the *Stromboli* was nearly up, and she'd been passed over for command, at least for now, so a different XO assignment or shore duty seemed likely in her future. She wasn't interested in a shore duty assignment, and if she were going to be an XO, it'd be much better to serve with someone she knew, respected, and cared for than deal with the unknown.

Hitting the reply button, she composed a response to David.

David,

I am so happy for you! After all this time, you finally beat me to a ship command. Of course, it's got to be named after a famous Israeli. I think CDFPER finds amusement in these assignments. I don't have anything lined up for my next billet, so I'd love to serve with you again. My detailer's name is Lieutenant Hasan Darzi. I attached his fleet link profile to this message. See you soon!

– Sheila

Once she hit send, she wrote another message to her detailer explaining the situation, and that he'd be contacted shortly about the XO position on the *Rabin*.

What have I just gotten myself into? she wondered as she headed back for her long-awaited hot bath. Where would this lead? Would she and David both be up to the task? That was a question that only time would tell.

David finished the last inspection of his full-dress uniform, pausing for just a moment to consider the ceremony he was about to participate in. *My first ship command,* he thought to himself, wishing for a moment that his father could be there to see him.

As he walked out of the officers' quarters he stayed in and made his way to the berth for the *Yitzhak Rabin*, David's mind went back to the email containing his orders that he received from Coalition Defense Force Personnel—CDFPER—just a few weeks prior. "Proceed to the Canaan Station where the CSV *Yitzhak Rabin* is docked, and upon arrival, report to your immediate superior in command for duty as the commanding officer of CSV *Yitzhak Rabin*," it instructed. A smile came across his lips as he read the orders for the first time and several times after, a sense of pride and excitement growing inside of him each time he re-read the email.

Looking back at his nearly twenty-year career in the CDF, if someone had told back then that he would command a destroyer, he'd have laughed in their face. How interesting it was that he had become his father despite his vow for so long to be a man of peace and take a different path? So much had happened to change his way of thinking over the course of his career that, while he could think of several defining moments, he realized that where he stood now was the result of a journey and that perhaps the journey was the point.

Sheila had taken over the position of executive officer the week prior and had gotten settled in to her new digs aboard the *Yitzhak Rabin*. He didn't know any of the other officers onboard, nor had he served with any of them. Given the CDF's massive size of nearly one hundred million men and women under arms, that wasn't unusual, but he had hoped

to be acquainted with at least a few of the senior officers prior to their deployment.

The outgoing commanding officer, Major Amina Najem, met David at the gangway of the *Rabin*, standing in the airlock along with Sheila and a small honor guard. As David stepped onto the ship, the senior enlisted soldier trilled a bosun's pipe and the assembled company braced to attention as David approached.

David turned toward Major Najem. "Permission to come aboard, ma'am?"

Najem smiled. "Granted, Major Cohen."

David glanced at the woman's uniform. After sixteen years in the military, he could read a uniform in such a way that it was like reading a book on a person's life, from the campaign ribbons, to the national flag if present, to medals or honors awarded. It was all there, like an autobiography that only those who served in the brother and sisterhood of war could understand. Major Najem had been in the service for twenty years, was from New Arabia, and a Muslim, according to her ribbons and the flags on her uniform.

It was customary that the outgoing CO would take the incoming CO around the ship prior to change of command. "If it would be possible, Najem, I'd like to tour the ship prior to the change of command ceremony this afternoon," he asked.

Najem nodded a bit stiffly. "Of course, Major." She turned to the honor guard. "Honor guard, at ease." The enlisted personnel shifted to parade rest.

For the next two hours, Najem escorted David through the *Rabin*, showing him the ship's detailed status of completion and identifying any open issues as they walked. *At only two years in space, the* Rabin *still practically has a new starship smell.* There were no signs of mechanical issues, and he observed that the enlisted personnel were well drilled, appearing to

perform like a well-oiled machine. In David's eyes, that was a mark toward a competent commanding officer.

Near the end of the tour, he'd begun to relax with the major enough to venture a joke about the ship's name. "I must say, Major, it's interesting that the first commanding officer of a ship named after a former Israeli prime minister from Earth is a Shi'ite Muslim," David said with mirth in his voice.

Najem looked at him for a moment before smiling. "When I took command, I researched who Yitzhak Rabin was. I found it mildly ironic and a reminder of how far we've come that I would be the first to take command of a ship named for him."

"He gave his life for peace, and it wasn't realized for another sixty years after he died. Today, I stand here, an Orthodox Jew, taking command of a ship named after him, from a Muslim." David broke into a large grin. "That almost sounds like a joke about a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim in the same boat."

Najem laughed softly. "I wasn't sure what you would be like, Major," she admitted earnestly. "You are larger than life to some in the service, and to others, you are a symbol to be hated."

David looked down at his feet for a moment before looking back at her. "I'm just a man trying to do my job. No hero or devil here."

"Ha, and modest too. Well, for what it's worth, from me, I think you'll make a fine commander for this ship. Take care of my crew, Major. I've tried to make this ship the best destroyer in the fleet. I expect you to keep it that way," she said in a friendly but direct tone.

"I will do my best," David said in return, meaning every word. "I think it's about time. Shall we proceed to the cargo bay?"

“Yes, it is. Follow me,” Najem said as she walked off.

David followed behind Najem, as it was still her ship for the next hour.

The *Rabin* was a small ship, much smaller than the escort carrier David had finished his last deployment on as the XO. The two officers neared the main cargo bay of the destroyer. It had been completely cleared of all cargo with numerous chairs set up for the company of the ship and guests. David’s mother had made the journey to see him take command, as had a number of friends of his from previous postings that happened to be nearby. A number of Najem’s friends were in attendance as well, as were her husband and two children. Today wasn’t simply a change of command, but also her retirement after twenty years of service to the Terran Coalition.

David checked his wrist communicator. It showed ten minutes before the ceremony was to start at 3 PM. The proper protocol was for the executive officer — in this case, Sheila — to call the crew to muster. Right on time, the 1MC tone sounded.

“Now hear this. Now hear this,” Sheila’s voice echoed across the ship. “All hands, report to cargo bay one for command transfer and retirement ceremony. I say again, all hands report to cargo bay one for command transfer and retirement ceremony.”

Following Sheila’s announcement, the sixty or so members of the *Rabin*’s crew that weren’t already in the cargo bay entered to take their positions. Najem and David waited until the command master chief standing next to the entryway gave a nod to proceed.

At his signal, they walked into the cargo bay, Najem leading the way. While the Coalition Defense Force onboard ships retained many customs of the wet navies they descended from, one thing that changed through the years

was how a military hat, known as cover, was worn on a ship. On the bridge, cover was still worn, and in cargo bays being used for a ceremony, the bay was considered to be outside, and therefore, cover was worn. For this reason, both Najem and David put on and straightened their dress covers as they walked into the bay.

As Najem proceeded on, David paused as an enlisted crewmember rang the portable ship's bell twice, which had been setup for the ceremony, while the bosun trilled his pipe for the formal piping of the CO into the bay. The master chief announced, "CSV *Yitzhak Rabin*, arriving."

Najem strode down the aisle to the platform that had been erected in the bay, saluting the officers and enlisted personnel that lined both sides of the aisle as she passed. Exchanging a final salute with Colonel Heppner, she stood to his right as David entered the cargo bay. The same enlisted crewmember rang the ship's bell twice again, and the bosun trilled his pipe once more.

"Major, Coalition Defense Force, arriving," the master chief announced.

Walking down the aisle in Najem's steps, David raised his hand to his brow and saluted the ship's company as he passed them; the enormity of his assignment began to fully sink in. There were nearly four hundred and fifty crew souls on the ship; those lives now rested in his hands. It was his job to see them through the next three years and bring them home safe and sound to their families.

Reaching the platform, David climbed the steps and finally stood before Colonel Heppner. The two saluted each other crisply as the colonel started the ceremony.

"As you were," Heppner said, his voice carrying across the cargo bay.

Turning to the assembled crew, Heppner began, "Crewmembers of the *Yitzhak Rabin*, we come together today

to salute your commanding officer, Major Amina Najem, for her service and dedication to the Terran Coalition and the Coalition Defense Force, and to see her off into a retirement well-earned after twenty years of service. We also welcome a new commanding officer, Major David Cohen, who will lead you into battle for the next three years."

As Heppner spoke, David's mind came alive with thoughts of how the next three years would go. Waves of doubt chased his mixed feelings of excitement. *Lord, please let me be up to this task*, he prayed in his head. Could he handle the stress or accept that during a war, he couldn't bring every person under his command home? Pushing this hesitation out of his mind as he looked out into the sea of faces, he found his mother and smiled at her. She looked so proud of him, though he could also tell that she wished his father were there to see his momentous accomplishment.

"Captain Arnold," Heppner began, speaking to the *Rabin*'s chaplain, "please step forward and lead us in the invocation."

Captain Jules Arnold, the non-denominational Christian chaplain of the *Rabin,* took a step forward and spoke into the microphone on the podium. "Eternal Father, strong to save, bless this proceeding and the soldiers who serve on this ship. Grant us wisdom, courage, and help us to walk in your will. Amen."

Arnold stepped back as Heppner returned to the podium. "Major Najem, Major Cohen, please stand."

David and Najem stood and took their places for the tradition of transfer of command. Heppner continued. "Major Najem, are you ready to be relieved?"

Najem stood ever so taller before she spoke. "I am ready to be relieved."

Following tradition, David faced her and said, "I relieve you, Major."

Najem smiled at David. “I am relieved.”

Over the next few minutes, several officers who had known Najem throughout her career took the podium and spoke about her exploits, her care for her family and crew, and how privileged they felt to know and have the opportunity to work with her. Something that David really focused on was how her family was mentioned repeatedly, and that the sacrifices they’d made were also honored. When Najem was presented with a Terran Coalition flag that had been ceremonially flown above the main government annex on Canaan, she handed it to an older woman, whom David realized was her mother due to the similarities in how they looked, despite an obvious age difference.

Thinking back to his own mother receiving the flag that had draped his father’s casket, David held back tears as he thought about how often he had missed his father, not always understanding why his father could not be there for various events. *At least this family didn’t know that pain in the same way.*

One of the final traditions of the ceremony was the reading of a poem named *The Watch*. At every retirement ceremony David had ever attended, it was read. Today, Sheila read it, standing at attention and reciting it with purpose after being called on by Colonel Heppner.

“For twenty years, this soldier has stood the watch.” Each time the word “watch” was said, the portable bell was struck twice.

“While some of us were in our bunks at night, this soldier stood the watch.”

“While some of us were in school learning our trade, this soldier stood the watch.”

“Yes…even before some of us were born into this world, this soldier stood the watch.”

"Many times, she would cast an eye toward home and see her family standing there, needing her guidance and help, needing that hand to hold during those hard times, but she still stood the watch."

"She stood the watch for twenty years, she stood the watch so that we, our families, and our fellow countrymen could sleep soundly in safety each and every night, knowing that a soldier stood the watch."

"Today we are here to say… Soldier, the watch stands relieved. Relieved by those you have trained, guided, and led. Soldier, you stand relieved, we have the watch!"

After a few moments of silence, Sheila continued, "Bosun, stand by to pipe the side. Soldier's going ashore!"

Najem stepped forward, exchanged a salute with Colonel Heppner, and began to walk down the aisle. Upon reaching the end, the bosun's pipe trilled once more, and the master chief announced, "Major, Coalition Defense Force, departing."

A round of applause broke out throughout the cargo bay as Najem and her family walked out. At Heppner's nod, David walked down the aisle as well. The bosun piped out his departure and the master chief announced, "CSV *Yitzhak Rabin*, departing." David then exited the bay and stood outside, waiting for the rest of the senior officers to depart, after which the entire ship's company had been invited to join in a "wetting down" of the new commander. *It's going to be a long night. One I will cherish for decades to come.*

A WEEK LATER, David was settled into the *Rabin*. He had his gear moved into the CO's quarters and had made the CO's office onboard his own. He'd developed a routine that made sense to him; always an early riser, David liked to get up at

what he called O Dark Thirty, usually four-thirty a.m. CMT. He'd exercise for thirty to forty-five minutes, shower, and get breakfast before taking the first watch on the bridge. He also tried to feel out the rest of the senior officers and develop rapport with them. The chief engineer on the *Rabin*, Captain Arthur Hanson, wasn't that difficult for him to figure out. Hanson was a nerd at heart; he thrived on new technologies and tinkered with the *Rabin*'s engines to keep them in tip-top shape. David had enough engineering knowledge to know a good engineer when he saw one.

After the first shift was completed later that day, David had scheduled a one-on-one meeting with Hanson, as well as First Lieutenant Ruth Goldberg, the tactical action officer —known as the TAO for short.

Hanson walked into David's office, a few beads of sweat on his forehead, betraying his nervousness. "Captain Arthur Hanson, reports as ordered, sir!" he announced after coming to attention in front of David's desk.

"At ease, Captain. Have a seat," David replied, gesturing to the chairs that sat in front of his desk.

Hanson sat down but looked as if he was sweating bullets. "Uh, so, what can I do for you, sir?"

David tried to set the man at ease by smiling. "I want to get to know you better, Captain. This is my first ship command. I served on a vessel that changed command, and I was really struck by how the colonel that took over handled it. One of the things he did was sit down with every senior officer and have a one-on-one with them. I took notes on how he did it. I try in every posting I have had to observe the best attributes and actions my superiors took to one day apply them to my own command."

"I see, sir," Hanson said, little beads of sweat still showing on his forehead.

“I was reading in your service jacket that you’ve primarily served in advanced fusion reactor research and testing assignments. A few years ago, you requested posting to the fleet... I have to ask, why would you want to get out of R&D? That had to be a pretty nice assignment.”

“It was a great assignment, sir. I love working with reactors and trying to get every last ounce of power out of them. I actually got to work on the design and testing team for the reactors in the Ajax class. We were able to improve the ability of the reactor to generate power by nearly forty percent,” Hanson said with obvious pride, loosening up a bit.

“Sounds like the kind of thing that could help the entire war effort.”

“Yes, sir, I think it was. Eventually, I just got to the point where I felt I had to stand up and be counted.”

David peered at Hanson; that wasn’t quite the answer he’d expected from the nerdy engineer. “How so?”

“Well, sir, you sit behind the line long enough, you get used to it. I really felt like I was in some ways hiding. I resolved to volunteer for combat duty. I’m no Marine, but I wanted to do my part.”

“That’s rather admirable, if you ask me,” David said, then pursed his lips together.

“Thank you, sir.”

“So how’d you end up here?”

“Well, sir, my detailer said this ship needed a good engineer, and she’s an Ajax class. I did design the reactor,” Hanson said with a smile. “You wouldn’t believe how much more we can get out of these things after the design team integrates the information I’ve been collecting.”

“It really is a technology race, isn’t it?” David said, more rhetorically than anything.

“Our edge is our technology and our training. At least from my perspective, sir.”

David completely agreed with Hanson; the Terran Coalition couldn't ever hope to match the League's overwhelming numbers, but they had better technology, highly trained personnel, and their soldiers were simply more motivated. It made sense; people fighting to defend their families and homes were going to be more effective than conscripts forced to fight on pain of death. It had been that way for centuries. He had read in history text books in high school that back on Earth, the old Freedom Coalition, made up of the nation-states that abandoned Earth, had a scientist named Dr. Sir James Lawrence, who discovered a method to artificially fold space through a stable wormhole. That key piece of technology allowed the Freedom Coalition to evacuate tens of millions of people off Earth, and eventually form the Terran Coalition.

"Agreed. And our training is something that can never be neglected, even in wartime. If we don't exercise ourselves on a near daily basis, skills are lost. I can't allow that on my ship, nor can anyone in the CDF allow it." David paused for a moment. "Is there anything I can do to help your department or anything I can get you that you need?"

Hanson shook his head. "No, sir. Major Najem was really good about making sure we had what we needed. All I'd ask is that if I have a request, you do your best to get it for us."

"You have my word on that, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

"Before we adjourn, anything you'd like to talk about?" David asked.

"Uh, no, sir. I'm going to avoid the obvious, sir," Hanson said. "I'm sure you get tired of people asking about it."

That was when David decided he was really going to like Hanson. Everyone wanted to talk about his father. What was it like being the son of the hero? If David had a credit for

every time someone asked him that, he'd be rich beyond all dreams. *Might not have to think about it all the time either.*

"I appreciate that more than you can know."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'd better get ready for the next meeting. Thank you for stopping by." David stood and extended his arm. Hanson took it and they shook hands firmly.

"Yes, sir. I'll be down in engineering, sir."

"Carry on, Captain."

Hanson turned and left the office, giving David a few minutes to prepare for his next one-on-one meeting with First Lieutenant Ruth Goldberg, who was more of an enigma. The TAO was primarily responsible for controlling the weapons systems on the ship, guided by David's orders. Few positions were more important on a warship, and David's goal was to create a seamless working relationship with Ruth. In a battle, it would be vital that she understood exactly what he wanted to occur.

To within almost the second of the meeting time, there was a knock on the hatch to David's door. "Come in!" he yelled.

The hatch swung open and Ruth walked in confidently. She came to attention before his desk. "Lieutenant Ruth Goldberg reporting as ordered, sir!"

"At ease, Lieutenant," David said. "Please, have a seat."

Ruth sat down on the chair nearest to her and stared at David with piercing eyes, almost as if they were boring through him. "What can I do for you, sir?" she asked.

"Straight to the point... I like that, Lieutenant. As I just told Captain Hanson, I've been through several changes of command over the years, and I always took notes when I saw someone do it particularly well. One thing that impressed me was a new CO that did one-on-one meetings with all the senior staff. So I decided to crib his idea."

“I see, sir,” Ruth’s face was emotionless, and her tone of voice direct.

David pressed on. “In reviewing your service jacket, I couldn’t help but notice some discrepancies in your dates of service.” He smiled. “You seem to have been in the CDF since you were sixteen.”

A look that morphed between pride and sadness washed over Ruth’s face. “Yes, sir. My parents and the rest of my family were killed during the League invasion of our home planet when I was fifteen. I joined a resistance cell. After a year, TCMC Marines retook our planet… and I forged my father’s signature on my enlistment papers.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I didn’t realize.”

“I don’t normally talk about it, sir. I discovered throughout the course of my service that I have a knack for gunnery control. So I applied for a limited duty officer position at OCS, and here I am.” Ruth smiled ruefully. “I get to stop the Leaguers from doing to another world what they did to mine.”

David felt from the way she spoke that she left off, “And I get to make up for what they did to mine.” Revenge could be a powerful motivation, but a dark one. It was something David wrestled with daily. There were parts of him that simply wanted to kill every last League soldier out there. Yet he also realized that revenge led to a dark place, and that if he allowed himself to give in fully to hating the League, he’d be no better than them. *Who I am kidding? I hate the League, what it stands for, and its leadership like Admiral Seville, more than anything.*

“So do we all, Lieutenant. So do we all,” David said. “Is there anything I can do to improve the tactical department or give you the tools you need to do your job better?”

“Well, sir, we haven’t been to the Valiant Shield exercises before, but this year, we were selected to participate before

you took command. The ship has never taken home any Command Excellence awards. The crew would love to change that."

"That sounds like a great goal, Lieutenant. From your perspective, where are we lacking?"

"I don't think we're lacking in basic skills, sir. But we need more drills and in time those bring practiced muscle memory that doesn't fail in times of stress. I would recommend that we begin a regimen of random battle drills, and closer to the exercise, we put the crew through its paces constantly."

"It sure would be nice to have a Battle E on this ship at our first exercise," David said with a grin. The Battle E, or the Battle Efficiency Award, was given to the ship that performed the best in a series of exercises within its squadron. They were a source of great pride for the crew who were allowed to wear a distinctive Battle E ribbon on their uniform if the ship they were serving on held a Battle E. "Work with the XO to put together the battle drill scenarios. I want them kept fresh and to be scenarios we'd be likely to see in the real world."

"Yes, sir," Ruth said with a decided perk to her voice. "If I may, sir, I couldn't help but notice you are from New Israel. Do you practice?"

David immediately realized Ruth had asked if he was a practicing Jew. "I am. I consider myself to be a modern Orthodox Jew. What about you?" Ruth had a Star of David patch under the CDF flag on her shoulder.

"I'm somewhere between Conservative and Orthodox, sir." She offered a half-smile. "I don't always keep kosher, but I do keep up with my prayers and don't eat pork."

David laughed. "I don't know many Jews, even Reform, that eat pork. I know our chaplain is a Christian, so do we have any services of our own onboard?" David asked.

“There’s a group of us that gathers for Shabbat weekly, sir. On Saturday, we also gather for a message delivered via subspace radio. Since several of us are Orthodox, we recruit a non-Jew to turn on the feed for us.”

“I see. Perhaps there is room for one more?”

“There’s always room for one more, sir. Perhaps you would care to lead us this Friday? I understand that you once wanted to be a rabbi.”

“That was a lifetime ago.” *I am not going there in my first one on one discussion with a subordinate*. “But I would be happy to join you all, and if I contribute in some way, I will.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll send an invite to your account on the ship’s calendar.”

David suddenly felt uncomfortable. Confronting that part of his past wasn’t something he liked to do. Going from a man who wanted to teach others about God, to a military officer responsible for the deaths of only God knew how many other sentient beings disturbed him. “Well, Lieutenant, I’d better get ready for my next meeting. Thank you for giving me a few minutes of your time.” He stood as he finished speaking.

“Of course, sir. I look forward to our ship winning that Battle E.” Ruth stood as well.

As he had with his previous meetings, he extended his hand and shook hers firmly. “Carry on, Lieutenant.”

As Ruth left, David wondered what anger and hate she harbored toward the League. He worried that it would eventually consume her and made it one of his goals for his assigned time to the *Rabin* to try to help her through those emotions. Maybe in so doing, he could help himself as well.

Between planning sessions with the senior officers over the next few weeks, Sheila and Ruth’s random battle drills, and constant tweaks of their systems to get just a little more effectiveness out of the main reactors and systems by

Hanson, the ship was more than ready to compete in Valiant Shield.

For two weeks, the *Rabin* and her crew participated in the around-the-clock exercises and simulations. Much to David's surprise, the *Rabin* took home not only the "Battle E," but also the Fast Warfare Excellence award, and the Engineering and Survivability Excellence award at the end of the exercise. As she headed back to the front, a gold E, a black E, and a red E were proudly displayed under her bridge, and all members of her crew wore the Battle E ribbon with pride.

Over the next six months, the *Rabin* also participated in a number of border skirmishes, including a couple that resulted in disabled League vessels without taking serious damage herself. However, he knew it was only a matter of time before a major engagement occurred in his assigned patrol sector, as the League had been pouring more resources into the area for weeks, building up to a new offensive campaign.

August 16th, 2460 started much like every other day for the last few months. David got up early at 0430 hours CMT, exercised in the ship's gym, took a shower, and readied himself for the day. Grabbing a hot cup of coffee and a small breakfast before he made his way to bridge, he exchanged pleasantries with most of the ship's officers. Another thing the CDF had inherited from its wet navy predecessors was customs and courtesies to officers. As such, whenever he first encountered any crewman on the *Rabin* in a given twenty-four-hour period, enlisted or officer, that person would come to attention. Since they were on a ship, cover was not worn except on the bridge and salutes were not exchanged except when covered.

While David respected the traditions, the practice made him feel somewhat out of place. He didn't really believe he

deserved the level of attention given, but that was tradition, and an old master chief or two had explained to him that the customs weren't for him, but more for the position he occupied. That was something he could accept far more freely.

As he reached the bridge of the *Rabin*, he donned his cover and strode through the hatch. The eagle-eyed master chief announced David's presence. "Commanding officer on the bridge."

Those crewmen and officers who were not strapped into their stations immediately came to attention and saluted; David, in turn, returned that salute and took the CO's chair. A junior officer who had been standing watch turned to David. "Sir, are you ready to take the conn?"

David nodded. "This is the commanding officer. I have the conn."

The rest of the officers on station acknowledged David's order as he spent the next few minutes studying the ship's status displays before settling in to the first watch of the day.

A few hours into the watch, the communications officer interrupted David's thoughts. "Conn, communications. I have flash traffic from the CSV *Dutiful*."

His eyebrows shot up at the mention of the *Dutiful*; it was another Ajax class destroyer assigned to his sector, and its CO was a lieutenant colonel who doubled as the overall commander for the space action group David and his ship were assigned to.

"Put it to my personal viewer, Lieutenant."

A moment later, a video feed of Lt. Colonel Dyson showed on the viewer above the CO's chair.

"Greetings, Major," Dyson said. "How are those shiny new Es on your ship doing?"

The mention of the Battle E brought a smile to David's face as he beamed with pride. "Still have that new paint

smell, Colonel."

"Well, we're about to put them to the test. I'm marshalling a force to interdict a League convoy that's trying to exit Coalition space. CDF Intelligence believes that the convoy contains thousands of captured civilians that the League is trying to transport back to their space."

David's stomach turned at this news. Captured Terran Coalition civilians were treated as no more than slaves by the League. They were forced into reeducation camps where torture was commonplace, until death came from the back-breaking hard labor they had to endure. "Understood, sir. How can we help?"

"Proceed to the coordinates I'm about to send you as fast as possible. My navigator tells me you'll arrive after us, but it's vital we jump this convoy while its Lawrence drives cool down."

"Aye, sir. Wouldn't want to miss the party." David grinned.

Dyson laughed. "You won't, Major. There are ten League combat ships escorting these freighters. We'll have three frigates with us, but it's still going to be a fight." His expression darkened. "Godspeed, Major. We'll see you soon."

"Godspeed, Colonel," David said before the screen went dark.

The mood on the bridge had gone from businesslike to edgy within seconds of David's discussion with Dyson. He took note as his mind ran through what they were about to fly into. A major fleet engagement, where they would be outnumbered, though not necessarily outgunned. Terran Coalition vessels, especially the newest classes such as the Ajax, were technologically superior to any League ship of equal tonnage. The problem for the Terran Coalition was that the League greatly outnumbered them on a large scale. While

the League could stand to lose four ships to each CDF ship it destroyed, the CDF had to achieve a ratio of between six and eight to one. Anything less was a pyrrhic victory.

"XO, take the navigation station. Lieutenant Godfrey, take tactical sub control, if you please."

The navigator, Lieutenant Godfrey, looked back at him, her face ashen. "Sir?"

David shook his head. "Lieutenant, this is no slight on your abilities, but we're about to fly into our first major fleet engagement, and I want the best helmsman on the ship flying us. No second chances on this one. You've only been on the job for three weeks."

Godfrey nodded stiffly. "Aye, sir."

David wished he hadn't had to say that on the open bridge, but he couldn't have a novice taking them into combat for the first time. Sheila was the best pilot on the ship and he needed her flying.

As she took her position at the navigation station, looking out the bridge windows, David punched up the ship wide intercom, 1MC.

"Attention, all hands, this is the commanding officer. General Quarters! General Quarters! Man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations! Set material condition one throughout the ship. This is not a drill."

A moment after David finished speaking, blue light bathed the bridge of the *Rabin*, and the general quarters klaxon sounded. There would be pandemonium below as the crew of the ship raced to their assigned battle stations. *I remember those days*.

Sheila looked back from the navigation station. "Conn, navigation. Course laid in and our Lawrence drive is ready to engage."

"TAO, energize our shields and charge the energy weapons capacitor the moment we exit our second jump.

Pre-load all magnetic cannons with high-explosive rounds. Make missile cells one and two ready in all respects except opening the outer doors."

"Aye aye, sir!" Ruth said. "Shields raised, magnetic cannons loaded with high-explosive rounds."

David looked toward Sheila. "XO, charge Lawrence drive."

"Aye, sir. Charging Lawrence drive."

David punched a button on his chair, activating the intercom down to the engine room. "Cohen to Hanson."

"Hanson here, sir."

"The moment we secure our Lawrence drive, start emergency jump readiness procedures. I want to be on our way the second it's safe."

"Aye aye, sir."

Only downside of our FTL system. If we jump too many times in quick succession, exotic particles are introduced and if they appear in the wrong spot, well... catastrophic explosion and no more Rabin.

The ship's Lawrence drive started drawing power from the main reactor, building up to what amounted to critical mass, opening a stable wormhole between two points. As soon as the wormhole was confirmed to be stable, Sheila guided the *Rabin* through its gaping maw, and the *Rabin* emerged on the other side. Little was said on the bridge as the *Rabin* went through a fifteen-minute cool down period, with the engineering staff confirming that the Lawrence drive was ready to engage once more.

David took a few minutes to collect his thoughts before whispering a prayer in Hebrew. "God, if it is your will, protect my crew and allow them to safely return to their families." He always prayed before battle, but never for victory; only asking that God spare the lives of his crew. He raised his head as the final notification from engineering to proceed came in.

“Conn, engineering. Safety checks complete. We’re ready to jump.”

“Engineering, acknowledged. Prepare for jump,” David said.

He gripped both sides of his chair, looking around the room. Fighting down the knot in his stomach, he decided that all of them might use a few words of encouragement.

Punching up 1MC again, David spoke into the mic, “Attention, all hands; this is the commanding officer. We are about to jump into combat against the League. Our objective is to neutralize the enemy force and rescue civilians being held on slave transports. This will be our first true battle together. Remember your training, trust in your crewmates, and say a prayer. We’re going to need all the help we can get. Godspeed, Cohen out.”

David looked forward, toward Sheila. “XO, engage Lawrence drive.”

7

SPACE TORE itself open in Sector 17A and a wormhole appeared; a swirling mass of color and energy. The CSV *Yitzhak Rabin* emerged, its artificial tunnel through the stars closing within seconds of its passage. On the bridge, Sheila was the first to speak. "Conn, navigation. Transit complete. Emerging from wormhole within five thousand kilometers of target."

David took in the situation for a moment, looking above his chair at the CO's display. Noting that all systems were normal, he turned his attention to Ruth.

"TAO, report."

Ruth's eyes looked over her monitors. "LIDAR sensors coming online, sir." The first seconds after emergence from FTL were the most nerve-racking as the detection systems reset. Blips appeared on the screens in front of her. "Six Lancer class frigates designated Master One through Six, Four Cobra class destroyers, designated Master Seven through Ten. Multiple transports, designated Sierra One through Seven, sir. They're not moving." She didn't bother reading out the Coalition ships present led by Dyson's vessel, the CSV *Dutiful*.

David nodded. Four Cobra class destroyers and six Lancer class frigates from the League weren't bad odds for the Coalition force assembled. The Cobra was an older destroyer that the League deployed en masse; two of them alone were no match for the newest Ajax class destroyers, and Lancer class frigates were even less capable against newer Coalition technology. "TAO, what's the closest enemy vessel to us?"

Ruth's eyes never left her displays. "Master One and Two, sir. Range, six thousand kilometers." In CDF nomenclature, Master denoted a hostile contact; a target.

"Navigation, plot intercept course!"

"Intercept course, aye, aye sir."

"TAO, firing point procedures, neutron beams and magnetic cannons, target Master One and Master Two."

"Aye, sir, firing solution set for Master One and Master Two."

David sat back slightly in his chair. Fighting to keep his adrenaline in check, he viewed his plot one more time. "TAO, shoot, all weapons."

The *Rabin*'s engines fired brightly, accelerating toward her targets. The two League Lancer-class frigates turned to face their new foe. A full salvo of magnetic cannon projectiles erupted from the *Rabin*'s forward dorsal and ventral mag-cannon turrets and raced toward her opponents, followed by a burst from her neutron beam emitters. Hits sent ripples across the shielding of both targets. A bright flare came from the second Lancer, the barrage successfully battering down its shields.

"Conn, TAO. Master One shields are now at thirty percent," Ruth said. "Master Two shields have failed."

David acknowledged her statement with a slight nod. "Navigation, come about and present our forward arc to Master Two. TAO, firing point procedures, forward missile cells and magnetic cannons on Master Two,"

“Firing solution set, sir.”

“TAO, shoot, all weapons.”

The *Rabin* turned sharply in space and brought her turreted mag-cannons to bear on enemy vessel. Missiles erupted from her forward missile cells, mounted both to port and starboard along the ship’s bow, and accelerated toward the League frigate. Another salvo from her forward dorsal-mounted mag-cannons quickly followed. Explosions ripped across the surface of the Lancer, blowing away the small vessel’s stern. On his tactical viewer, David watched as her speed decreased rapidly until the enemy ship was drifting in space.

Ruth’s reaction was measured and professional. “Conn, TAO. Master Two disabled, sir.” Then she noticed something on her screen. “Master One coming about, sir. She’s firing.”

The other Lancer, seeing her sister’s destruction, came from above and let loose with her own weapon’s complement—primarily missiles and plasma cannons—on the *Rabin*. The ship shook from the strain the barrage took on her shield generators.

Ruth stopped herself from gripping her board during the rocking. “Conn, TAO. Aft shields at sixty percent, aft point defense at eight-one percent effectiveness. Master One has taken up position directly behind us.”

David gave no outward reaction. The enemy had taken a risk with that maneuver, but trying to hide from the *Rabin*’s bow weaponry by moving along her stern would backfire for them. “TAO, firing point procedures, ready four fusion mines.”

Ruth’s reaction was nearly instantaneous as she armed the mines and prepared to launch. “Launch solution set, sir.”

David looked intently at his plot to be sure it was the right time to deploy. “TAO, shoot, fusion mines.”

From the rear of the *Rabin,* the disc-shaped mines dropped like depth charges of an old Earth wet navy. The helmsman on the doomed Lancer had apparently been following too closely as the ship's last second course change was too slow to avoid explosive devices.

The first struck the Lancer's forward shield and the resulting explosion caused the shield to fail for several seconds, leaving the other three mines to pass through unharmed to smack against the Lancer's thinly armored hull. The fusion warheads detonated, and in a blinding flash, they produced a massive burst of energy that ripped into and melted through the Lancer.

Each mine in succession produced a large explosion until the third's self-immolation claimed the Lancer's primary missile magazine, detonating its own volatile projectiles. A process feared by all crews began as the ship literally blew itself apart from the inside out. The resulting debris was no larger than one-foot chunks, and no escape pods were launched.

"Conn, TAO. Master One destroyed, sir. No escape pods detected."

The shocking loss of life caused by his orders washed over him. This was what he hated about war; no matter how often they would try to take prisoners over outright destruction of League ships, sometimes the ships simply blew up. He set that aside quickly in his mind and calmly asked, "TAO, target report?"

Ruth's eyes went back to her sensor display. "Conn, TAO. Master One, Two, Four, and Seven neutralized. Remaining enemy ships are grouping together around Sierra contacts…" She moved closer, apparently alarmed by a ghostly sensor reading. "Wait a minute, sir. I'm showing another wormhole transit, League signature. Unknown contact inbound!"

A short distance away from the fight, a new wormhole briefly ripped through space and time. The ship that emerged was larger than any other nearby, prominently displaying the foreboding insignia of the League of Sol.

David swallowed hard. He didn't need to hear Ruth's report to know what it was.

She gave the report as soon as she had confirmation. "Conn, TAO! New contact designated Master Eleven, classified as a Rand-class cruiser."

The monstrous Rand raced toward the battle like a one-hundred-fifty-kilo football linebacker rushing the pint-sized chess club's brawl. Clearly a superior combatant, its presence tilted the battle heavily in the League's favor.

David swallowed hard and restrained the fear twisting his stomach. Not a single ship present was a match for a Rand. Even together it might be impossible. "Comms, signal the *Dutiful*. Request immediate instructions."

Before the answer came, the Rand's heavy weaponry thundered in the darkness and ripped apart a small Meade-class frigate—CSV *Fredericksham*. The vessel and its crew were brushed aside like an annoying insect.

The cruiser turned to bring some of its weapons to bear upon the *Dutiful*. Dyson's ship took the hit to its dorsal side. Explosions tore through the destroyer's hull and the ship's engines died, leaving it crippled for the *Rand* to dispatch at her convenience.

Ruth's face displayed her fear as she turned toward David. "Conn, TAO! *Dutiful* disabled and *Fredericksham* has been destroyed."

David forced himself to stop and think despite the urgency of the situation, not allowing the enemy to compromise his observe-orient-decide-act or OODA loop. While two Ajax class destroyers and three Meade class frigates might take on a Rand class cruiser and win, with one

destroyer out of the fight and a frigate destroyed, it was shaping up to be a hopeless battle. Were it not for the transports, he would've ordered a general retreat, but he couldn't bear to leave the thousands of civilians in them to be sent back to League space as slaves. *We swore an oath to protect those people, at any cost—including our lives—if necessary.*

"TAO, status of Sierra contacts?"

"They're still immobile, sir."

"XO, intercept course on the Rand!" David barked, his mind made up. "Take us directly over the top of Master Eleven and stand by to execute a 90-degree ventral turn on my mark!"

"Aye aye, sir."

"TAO, firing point procedures, load all remaining fusion mines into the aft dispenser. Set time delay to four seconds."

"Aye aye, sir!"

David punched the button on his chair for the intercom to engineering. "Hanson, reroute all available power to the shields, and evacuate all personnel from the outer decks."

"Aye aye, sir!" Hanson said, his voice crackling through the speaker.

If Sheila was in her normal seat, it would be now that she leaned in and asked him what exactly the plan was. *Sorry old friend, can't explain it to you. You'll just have to trust me.*

The *Rabin* accelerated toward the Rand. Noticing the new annoyance, the League cruiser swatted at *Rabin* with its high-energy directed particle cannons, striking them head on. The ship rumbled strongly and energy feedback from the shield system caused the sensor station to blow its fuse.

"Conn, TAO. Forward shields near collapse, sir!"

David glanced toward Ruth. "TAO, firing point procedures, target neutron beams, magnetic cannons, and forward missile cells on Master Eleven."

“Firing solutions set, sir.”

David had no illusion to the lack of effectiveness of his ship’s weapons against the Rand. *Maybe we can just keep them guessing a few seconds longer. That’s all I need.*

“TAO, shoot, all weapons. XO, execute immediate evasive action without comprising our time to target.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Sheila said.

She began an evasive pattern immediately. The *Rabin*’s slight zig-zag caused a missile barrage to miss, the enemy weapons unable to track effectively at close range. The cruiser’s particle cannons hit home once more, despite her maneuvering. The first strike caused a brief flare along the *Rabin*’s forward shields, successfully overloading them, while the second cut right through the armor, piercing into the vessel’s bow. Debris and bodies erupted from the holes cut into the ship, the local crew desperately getting within the nearest set of pressure locks to get refuge from the vacuum. Meanwhile, the *Rabin* lashed back at the Rand with its weapons suite, obtaining multiple hits against its shields, but not causing any real damage.

The feedback from the shield system being overloaded was even nastier than before. One of the secondary consoles caught fire briefly before the bridge’s attentive damage control team extinguished the blaze.

Over the clamor, Ruth’s voice bellowed, “Conn, TAO! Forward shields failed, sir! Forward hull and systems severely damaged!”

“Conn, navigation. We’re ten seconds from executing the turn, sir.”

“Navigation, steady as she goes. TAO, firing point procedures, aft mine dispenser. Stand by to release on my mark,” David said, his face almost serene. *I’m in the zone*.

The destroyer continued onward. On his tactical plot, David watched as the icons for the two ships merged on top

of one another. Apparently, the Rand's bridge crew assumed the worst; that the *Rabin* would ram them. Real time sensor information showed the heavy cruiser's shields diverting to a different arc—where perhaps they thought the Rabin would hit.

Gotcha. David's shout filled the bridge. "*Navigation, now!* TAO, shoot, aft mine dispenser!"

As soon as "now" left David's mouth, Sheila banked the ship upward in relative terms, pulling away from the Rand. As the maneuver completed, eight mines popped out of the aft dispenser, thrown directly onto the Rand's tough hull. As the four critical seconds counted down, the *Rabin*'s engines accelerated once more, thrusting the small destroyer away from her massive foe.

At the fourth second, the mines detonated successfully. The explosion they produced was colossal, tearing away armored hull and internal structure alike and engulfing the upper hull of the Rand in energy. Secondary explosions from lost magazines and a fuel bunker for the cruiser's shuttles tore up the top quarter of the ship's structure, doing massive internal damage.

"Conn, TAO. All mines impacted, sir." Ruth's voice had dropped down to normal volume. "Master Eleven is attempting to jump out."

Sheila shook her head. "They'll never make it," she said in a brief departure from normal bridge protocol.

Unexpectedly wounded by a foe inferior to her strength, the dying Rand turned away from the battle. Her wormhole drive began to power up. As it reached its full charge, the stress on its damaged systems became too great. Plasma tanks ruptured from structural damage, the overloaded power systems failed, and a catastrophic series of explosions gutted the hapless monster. Without warning, the ship's massive left engine wrenched free from the ship, an

explosion that tore apart the Rand from the inside out, turning the deadly beast into an expanding cloud of debris.

The *Rabin*'s bridge crew didn't stop to enjoy their great kill. David was all business as he asked Ruth, "TAO, status on the remaining hostile contacts?"

"Sir, Master Eight remains operational. It's heading straight for the transports and is firing on Sierra Four."

David swore under his breath, disgusted with the League actions. Not content to simply take a loss and retreat, they had to spoil the well by killing thousands of civilians. "TAO, firing point procedures, Master Eight. Anything we've got left."

The speaker on David's chair crackled. "Conn, engineering, this is Hanson. We've got causalities down here, and I'm unable to route power to any forward weapons systems except the magnetic cannon turrets."

David digested this new information and turned to Ruth. "TAO, can we disable Master Eight with only our magnetic cannons in time to prevent them from taking out those transports?"

"Unlikely, sir. Master Eight has taken limited fire in the engagement so far. Its shields are at nearly one hundred percent effectiveness."

David took the information in for a moment, looking up at his command plot. With the other CDF ships out of the fight, his options were limited. *I could engage with conventional weapons. Maybe Hanson will pull a rabbit out of his hat and get us something else. With full shields, though… that frigate could take out at least one transport before we could neutralize her.* With tens of thousands of lives hanging in the balance, he felt his mind freeze, a tug of war breaking out between protocol and emotion.

Controlled ramming. That's the only option left. "Navigation, plot intercept course with Master Eight. All ahead flank. I

want you to ram the contact."

Sheila whirled her head around toward David. "Say again, sir?"

"I said ram Master Eight, XO. Try to glance the belly of our ship off their dorsal mid-section."

Sheila continued to stare back at him. "With all due respect, sir, our bow is severely damaged and we may not survive the impact."

"And if we don't neutralize that ship, it will kill all of the civilians onboard those transports. We knew what the score was when we signed up for this job…they didn't. We'll do anything we can, including giving our lives to save them," David said calmly, despite the chaos around him. *I know that's the right call. It's right there in article one of the CDF code of conduct. I will give my life if necessary to defend the Terran Coalition and the civilians I protect.*

Sheila turned back around. "Aye aye, sir." While lower in volume, her tone was one of serious concern.

David punched a button on his console, pulling up the 1MC. "Attention, all hands, this is the commanding officer. Prepare for in-space collision! Evacuate the outer hull immediately and erect localized emergency force fields."

David glanced back to a tall, older enlisted man in the back of the bridge. "Master Chief, sound collision alarm."

"Sound collision alarm. Aye, sir!" the older man said, and immediately, a loud klaxon wailed.

The *Rabin* closed in quickly on the Lancer; its crew rather ineffectively attempted to evade. The two ships traded weapons fire at the last moment, but the *Rabin*'s weaponry wasn't able to penetrate the shields of the smaller League ship. As the *Rabin* entered its terminal course, Sheila angled the *Rabin*'s bow in such a way that the less damaged section would impact the frigate's command deck.

The *Rabin*'s bow plowed into the command deck section of the smaller frigate, crumpling up the underbelly of the ship and venting atmosphere into space. Small explosions occurred up and down the dorsal section of the Lancer and ventral section of the *Rabin*. Pieces of debris and super structure expanded out from both ships, small fires erupting as blisters on the hull before extinguishing from lack of oxygen in the vacuum. As the *Rabin* veered away toward open space, the Lancer's running lights flickered and it began to drift.

On the bridge of the *Rabin*, the crew had survived, but the ship suffered considerable damage. A small fire broke out in the back of the bridge that was quickly extinguished by the assigned bridge damage control team. David punched the communication button for the engineering spaces on his command chair. "Engineering, status?" he asked, hoping against hope the ship was still combat capable.

Hanson's voice came through the speaker. "Sir, I've had to SCRAM our main reactor. We're running off battery power. I hope to be able to restore our reactor once we can repair the damaged coolant lines."

David laid his head back on the headrest of his chair. "Understood. Keep me apprised."

"Conn, TAO! Multiple inbound wormholes!"

David leaned forward in his chair. *Dear God, we can't take any more*. "TAO, whose are they?" he asked, forcing calm into his voice.

Ruth's expression changed into a smile of relief. "Sir! Inbound wormholes have a CDF signature."

In front of the *Rabin* and visible through the transparent metal windows on the bridge, three wormholes opened and out of each emerged a large CDF warship and its consorts. Small craft quickly released from the ships, heading toward the transports.

Ruth looked back at David. “I’m reading the CSV *Cicero* and its battle group, sir.”

David finally allowed himself to relax just a hair. “Acknowledged, TAO. Communications, please send the commanding officer of the *Cicero* my compliments, and request that they send additional damage control and medical teams to all stricken vessels.”

“Grab a sandwich before you sit down, ladies and gentlemen. I don’t believe any of us have had the opportunity to eat in the last sixteen hours since the engagement,” David said. He and the rest of the senior command staff were seated in the conference room onboard the *Rabin*. Even in this space, there was ample evidence of the battle they’d just survived. Debris from the ceiling lay piled up against the bulkheads, and the holoprojector system was offline.

Hanson grabbed one of the sandwiches and ripped into it with gusto. “Thanks for having these brought up, sir. I’m not sure I’ve been this worn out since nuclear engineering school.”

Sheila smirked. “An army marches on its stomach, right?” She glanced over at what David was eating. “Are you sure this is kosher, sir?”

“I had one prepared without cheese.”

Ruth wore a smile, and it appeared as if she would join in the ribbing, but David’s curt reply wiped it off her face. “Most of our weapon systems remain offline due to lack of power, sir. Captain Hanson assures me we will have limited power to our magnetic cannons in the next twenty-four hours.”

David nodded before looking to Hanson. “What’s our overall status?”

“We’re in bad shape, sir. I’ve got teams still trying to access parts of the ship that were exposed to vacuum. It’s a real mess. We’ll require drydock for an extended period if the ship remains space worthy. I have concerns at this point that our main armored keel may be too damaged for Lawrence drive jumps.”

David looked around the conference room, noting the tired faces on his senior staff coupled with worried expressions. “Thank you, Captain. I have an update on our casualty reports.” He paused for a moment, looking down at the table, shame getting the better of him. “Search and rescue from the *Cicero* has confirmed seventy-eight fatalities onboard the *Rabin*.”

Seventy-eight people were nearly a sixth of the crew complement of the ship.

“We’ve had another fifty-nine evacuated to the *Cicero* for additional medical treatment. We took a beating.”

“I’d like to get a counselor or two to help the crew, sir,” Sheila said.

“I agree. I’ll let you coordinate that, XO. Our first objective must be to get the *Rabin* able to move under her own power. Then get underway to Canaan space dock.”

Ruth spoke up. “Sirs, I received a briefing from the tactical action officer onboard the *Cicero* as to what they found on the transports when the Marines stormed on board. There were over thirty thousand Terran Coalition civilians saved.”

“So intelligence was right for a change?” Hanson asked, apparently trying to inject some levity into the discussion. When no one else cracked a smile, he remained silent.

“At least we got it right,” David said. “That counts for something when I have to tell their families.” He cleared his throat. “Okay. Let’s get back to work. We’ll meet again in eighteen hours, but I want all of you to get at least six hours

sleep. If we're too tired to work, we'll make mistakes, which will cost us time we don't have. I want this ship underway in thirty-six hours. Dismissed."

Hanson and Ruth quickly stood and left the room, but Sheila remained behind. "David, are you okay?" she asked.

"No."

"Want to talk about it?"

He looked up at her. "Sheila, I just cost seventy-eight members of my crew their lives. I was supposed to get them home. I don't even know how to process that. I…" David's voice trailed off as he lowered his head, a grimace visible as he did.

"We all know the risks for what we do here. You know that. You said it yourself on the bridge when giving the order."

David shook his head. "Doesn't change that it's my job to get them home."

"It's also your job to protect our civilians and get them home. We did that today. You did that, David. You were so sure of yourself on the bridge when this happened. I thought you were going to sacrifice the entire ship to stop that frigate."

"During the fight, it's different." David finally lifted his head. "I get tunnel vision and it's easy to see the best way to defeat the enemy. But afterwards… I have to live with the decisions I make. I thought when I was in charge, I could get us all home. That's obviously not the case."

"No, it's not. But in times like this, we have to remember who our enemy is, and why this war is happening. Focus on defeating them, not on blaming ourselves."

David offered a half-hearted smile. "Good advice, counselor."

"Hah. I'll be on the bridge. Take your own advice and go get some sleep. You've been up for nearly twenty-four hours

straight. You need rest too."

"I'll try," he murmured before gathering up his tablet and walking out of the conference room behind her.

8

SITTING at the desk in his office onboard the *Rabin*, David took in the latest repair reports on the ship. It appeared that while the ship would require six to twelve months in drydock, she wasn't beyond repair yet. He flipped back to a rough draft of a letter to the family of one of the seventy-eight personnel on his ship that had perished during the last battle. Throughout his career, he had written to the families of everyone who had ever died under his command, dreading every single letter. Pausing for a moment, he remembered back to when he and his mother had been told that his father would not be coming home. The pain, the fury, all of it came back to him all at once. He hoped that the letters would be of some comfort to the families—though they could never be enough.

David believed that every life was precious, and that every life lost must be remembered, celebrated, and mourned. During his reflection, the communication tab on his tablet began to blink with a video conference request. He tapped on the request to see who it was from, and "*Colonel Meier, CSV* Cicero" popped onto the screen as the requestor. Pressing the accept button with his index finger, he brought up the video link. "Colonel, what can I do for you, sir?"

“I’ll cut straight to the chase, Major. I want you to know that I believe the actions of you and your crew during yesterday’s battle were among the bravest I have ever seen. You took on a heavy cruiser with a destroyer and somehow managed to win. Then you rammed a frigate and prevented it from destroying a transport craft with over thirty thousand civilians onboard. I don’t know if you got lucky, if you’re just that damned good, or maybe God’s looking out for you, but whatever it is, it ought to be celebrated. Everyone on your ship deserves a medal in my eyes.”

David’s head raced, wondering where Meier was going with this.

“I regret to inform you that you will not be getting such recognition,” Colonel Meier said with disapproval evident in his voice and a frown on his face. “I’ve been ordered to relieve you of your command and confine you to quarters for the trip back to Canaan. I’m going to spare you that indignity, but I must inform you that when we reach Canaan, you will be brought up before a review board to determine if you should be court-martialed. You have my word; I will do whatever I can to present evidence at the hearing in your favor. We need more officers like you out here in the fight, Cohen. Whatever happens, I want you to know it was an honor to meet you and your crew, and to serve with you. Godspeed.” Meier’s face blinked off the video link as it went dark.

David leaned back in his chair, angry, despondent, and ashamed all at the same time. *But I won*, he thought. A counter voice within him replied, *And you got twenty percent of your crew killed doing it, just like you got Beckett killed sixteen years ago.* He was already in a bad place trying to deal with the loss of so many. To now have the CDF say that he screwed up made it all the worse. The fear that he wasn’t cut

out to do this and that he was endangering the lives of those under his command roared to the surface.

Sitting quietly in his quarters, David pondered that for a long time.

AFTER THE *RABIN* had docked at Canaan's main space station two days later, it was time for the solemn ceremony to remove the dead from the *Rabin* and entrust them to the mortuary team for proper burial. David stood at the base of Cargo Bay Three, looking up at the large doors as they slid open to reveal the fallen, ready to be offloaded. It had taken several hours to transfer the remains into caskets, drape each one with the flag of the Terran Coalition, and line them up in neat rows inside of the cargo bay for unloading. Numerous service members from the station stood by to help with the transfer. An honor guard, in full dress uniform, stood at attention to the right of the cargo bay doors while the colors were displayed. Another two rows of soldiers stood outside of the doors at rigid attention. The caskets, as they were removed from the ship, would be walked down the aisle created by the formation.

Sheila, Ruth, and Hanson all stood behind David in full dress uniforms as uniformed pallbearers brought the first casket down the steps. David's right hand snapped up to his brow, along with rest of the assembled company. One by one, the caskets were brought down from the ship and taken to waiting anti-grav units to be moved inside of the station. There was a sad and somber mood that was so real, it could be felt. The soldiers looked at their feet; no one made eye contact with each other. David fought the urge inside him to show emotion, not allowing tears to well up in his eyes. At the halfway point of thirty-nine caskets, he could contain

himself no longer. A single tear rolled down his face, followed by another, then another.

Sheila glanced over at him, noticing the tears. She whispered, “David, it’s not your fault.”

Not moving his head or his hand, he whispered back, “I gave the order. It was on my watch. It is my fault.”

By the end of seventy-eight caskets—some that didn’t even contain remains due to the fact that the bodies had been lost in space—David’s mind was in a very bad place. Going between blaming himself and wanting to kill every last member of the League’s military, he snapped his hand down as the final casket was loaded into an anti-grav unit. A bagpiper with the color guard began to play “Amazing Grace.” He watched as the anti-grav units faded from view into the space station.

David looked to the three senior officers. “Was their sacrifice worth it?” he asked to no one in particular. *Of course it was, and even questioning that dishonors their memory.*

“Yes, it was, sir,” Sheila said in a somber but direct tone. “Thirty thousand innocent people went home. I believe if you asked each and every one of those who died on our ship, they’d gladly do it again.”

David looked back to the ship, unable to control his emotions as tears streamed down his face.

“It was worth it, sir. And it is an honor to serve with you,” Ruth said, her voice breaking too. The three of them looked at one another, and Sheila stood at attention. Ruth and Hanson followed as Sheila brought her hand up to her brow.

“Sir,” she said softly.

David turned around to see all three of them standing at attention, sharp salutes held. He slowly brought his hand to his brow before snapping it down in a crisp, practiced motion. They, in turn, did as well.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice devoid of life and energy.

“Come on, sir. Let’s go raise a glass to the fallen and get ready for the hearing,” Sheila said, gesturing to the gangway.

9

STANDING OUTSIDE of what amounted to a courtroom onboard the main CDF military station orbiting Canaan, David watched the waiting room silently with several of the *Rabin*'s officers, including Ruth and Sheila. In the few days that it took to get back to Canaan, he'd mostly stayed within his stateroom. He was frustrated and angry at his situation, replaying the events of the battle over and over, looking for where he went wrong. He hadn't asked any of his senior officers to come with him to the hearing. In fact, he was almost too ashamed to tell them what had happened, but the *Rabin* was a small ship and word quickly got around. While he would never admit it out loud, knowing that those he led had his back meant the world to him.

Sheila broke the silence by stating what David felt but was unwilling to say. "This is crap, sir. They weren't there."

A voice not belonging to the assembled officers spoke up. "I'm not sure I'd say it quite that directly, Captain." A portly man, wearing a CDF dress uniform that looked like it hadn't been ironed in weeks complete with the eagle insignia of the Judge Advocate General Corps, walked up.

"Major Richard Gray, JAG Corps, at your service, Major Cohen."

David regarded the man and his rumpled appearance. “Thank you, Major. I thought we would have had some time to discuss the case before going before the review board.”

Gray raised an eyebrow. “Yes, this case is moving a bit faster than most. But I think you’ll come out on top.”

David couldn’t help but let out a snort. “And why would you say that?”

Gray gestured to the officers gathered around. “Because you seem to have quite the loyal following. I also understand that Colonel Meier, CO of the *Cicero*, gave evidence on your behalf.”

David glanced toward the door. “What am I facing in there, Major?”

Gray looked David square in the eye. “A three-star general, Daniel Barton, that also commands the Canaan Home Defense Fleet. Bastard Barton, as we call him, seems to love to make examples out of young officers, and you’re square in his sights. The man is a defeatist in my view, but who am I to judge?”

David shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sure someone has decided I was a defeatist at some point in my life, but I simply abhor the needless loss of life,” David said with conviction. “So how is this going to work, Major?” *I just want this over with, regardless of how it turns out.*

“We’ll be called into the chamber, General Barton will present evidence against you, and I will present evidence for you. The board will decide if it will clear you or recommend you for a general court-martial.”

At that moment, a young corporal opened the door. “Major Cohen, Major Gray, they’re ready for you.”

Gray shifted his head back at the assembled officers. “You will have to wait here. Major Cohen, come with me, please.”

With that, they walked into the room, the large wooden doors closing behind them. The review board room, despite

containing five flag-ranked officers, wasn't an ostentatious place. It was functional, resembling a small courtroom. There was a table for the prosecutor and another for the defendant. Gray gestured toward the defense table; as he and David took their places, a door to the side of the judge's bench opened, and five generals walked out in file. The corporal who had escorted them in quickly announced, "All rise! Canaan general review board is now in session regarding the actions of Major David Cohen in the battle of Sector 17A." David and Richard came to attention as the five officers took their seats. General Barton, a tall, well-built man in an immaculate CDF dress uniform, took a seat at the prosecutor's table, while the other four generals sat behind the judge's bench. After the generals sat down, David and Richard followed suit and took their seats behind the defendant's table.

"General Barton, please begin your presentation on the actions of 16 August, 2460, in Sector 17A, that we are convened here to evaluate," announced a late middle-aged woman. A nameplate before her read "General Andrews."

Barton pushed back from his table and stood, setting his tablet down as he prepared to speak. "Rather than step through all the written testimony, I'd like to start by showing the board a simulation of the ramming."

A holoprojector snapped on, and a thirty-second simulation of the *Rabin* ramming the Lancer class frigate played on it, freezing at the point where the two ships began to drift away.

"Now, Major Cohen, I don't think we need to continue the simulation," Barton said, looking toward David and his counsel. "What we just saw here cost seventy-eight lives, not to mention causing extensive structural damage to your ship, rendering it un-space-worthy for a period of not less than twelve months."

Barton paused for a moment before continuing his verbal assault. “During the action of 16 August, 2460, Sector 17A, your ship received heavy damage in combat with a League escort unit conveying transports back to League territory. In that combat, your division commander was unable to communicate directly due to battle damage, making him unable to relay orders to you or your ship. You immediately began a ramming maneuver that, in my personal judgment, did nothing of sufficient merit in the battle or the war as a whole. You *wasted* those lives, Major, like pouring water into sand.” Barton looked down on the two men, a sneer plastered across his face.

Major Gray stood and waved a personal tablet in the air as a theatrical device; his response had already been sent electronically to the review board. “According to the after-action reports filed by Colonel Meier, the aforementioned action of the 16th of August was a victory that netted the capture of a League convoy that was later discovered to have carried roughly thirty thousand Coalition civilians from the occupied worlds in that sector to League labor gulags in their home space. Colonel Meier further stated, and I quote, ‘Major Cohen and the crew of the *Yitzhak Rabin* performed one of the bravest and most selfless acts I’ve seen throughout my twenty-four-year career. Furthermore, the major’s conduct was consistent with the finest traditions of the Coalition Defense Force and the high standards to which we hold our officers and enlisted soldiers.’”

Another general, who looked bored with the back and forth, interrupted Gray. “We don’t need you to explain this to us, Major. It’s all here in your brief. Major Cohen, your advocate has presented what looks to be a very effective defense should we proceed to court-martial, but do you have a statement for us now?”

Gray looked at David, who lowered his head for a moment, then stood up beside his counsel. He had rehearsed in his mind repeatedly what he was about to say, but nerves still ran away on him. “Thank you, sir, I do,” he said toward the general that asked him to speak. “The initial portion of the engagement in Sector 17A was a complete success for the Coalition Defense Force ships on site. When the League’s reinforcements—a Rand class heavy cruiser—jumped in, the direction of the battle quickly tilted against us. There were no good options. We could have fled and left the damaged ships and the transports to their fate. I could have continued to engage the Rand with conventional tactics, which at the time, and standing here today with the benefit of hindsight, I believe would have resulted in the destruction of our entire force. I elected to do something different and unorthodox When faced with a decision between allowing thousands of civilians to die, or to take out the final enemy ship, I chose the innocent lives we’re all sworn to protect. I consider what I did to have been the right decision. I fulfilled my duty. If I were in a similar situation again one day, I’d do the same thing.”

A third general spoke with a noticeable Scottish brogue; Andrew MacIntosh, whom David recognized from news reports as the leader of the Victory Project. He was surprised to see him here. “Even if it means we proceed to court-martial, young man?”

David set his gaze on MacIntosh and made eye contact. “Even then, sir.”

Barton stepped forward, practically shouting at David. “What about the dead crew? What do you have to say about getting seventy-eight of your subordinates killed when you were replaying your father’s last run? Seventy-eight of them, Major! At least your father had the good sense to order his crew to safety! There are seventy-eight people who will

never see their families again so you could hot rod into the side of a League frigate and have a good drinking story!"

Barton's words stung David deeply. It was as if he had been punched in the gut with every reiteration of the number of fatalities. *This man has no idea who I am, what I believe in, or why I fight. Screw him.* David turned toward him, his face red with anger.

"With all due respect, sir, I am not my father and what I did was in an entirely different situation. I am sorry that so many of my crew died. I am sorry that so many of our people are dying every day. I am sorry that we are at war, and that I was placed in this position. I am sorry that every day we fight, I am forced to kill people, and that people under my command die in practically every battle. Each decision I make, I weigh against the risk and the cost, but I am *not* sorry for what I did."

David's eyes flashed as he took in a breath. "Had I retreated, had I stood down or attempted to engage Master Eight with my remaining weapons, thirty thousand innocent people would have died in addition to the numerous military casualties. I took an oath. Every single member of my crew took an oath. *You* took an oath, sir, to defend our countries, to defend the Terran Coalition against all enemies, foreign and domestic. That oath includes protecting our civilians with our own lives. That's what we did. We did our job. I did my job."

MacIntosh raised an eyebrow at the forcefulness of David's statements while Barton looked ready to start a fistfight. "Well then," the general in the center chair said as she picked up her personal tablet. "We've heard your statement, Major, and we'll consider it while we deliberate the statements and evidence presented to us today. You are dismissed. Remain in the waiting room."

Major Gray pointed to the door with a pained expression, indicating for David to go first. As they walked out of the room, Gray whispered in his ear, "You've got more guts than brains, Major."

The door closing the behind them, the two men joined Ruth and Sheila on a bench in the hallway while Hanson remained standing.

"How's it look?" Ruth asked with a worried look on her face.

"It could go either way," David said.

Gray looked at David. "Tell me something...what's it really like out there? I only served for a year on a ship and we never saw combat. I've been a lawyer pretty much my entire time in the service."

David glanced at Gray, then back at his crew. "Major, if you want to know what the battle was like, I can put it this way. Living out there on the border leads to these things: boredom and anxiety broken up by moments of terror. And that's what battle is. Terror. You can try to ignore it or overcome it, but you'll never escape it. It's bad enough for ordinary crewmen who are powerless to do anything but follow orders and hope to come out alive. Being a commanding officer is worse. It means you actually have some power to try to avoid dying with the responsibility to do what has to be done to win the battle, no matter whose life is lost."

Ruth gave David a sympathetic look.

Gray was speechless for a moment. "If that's what it's like," he said finally, "why do you keep doing this?"

"Because someone's got to do it, and for whatever reason, we're good at it. I wish to God we weren't. Killing shouldn't be this easy, but our job is to keep everyone else behind the lines safe. We'll do it with every last ounce of devotion we have, Major."

MacIntosh guided the controls to the holo-simulation and paused on the frame that showed the Rand class heavy cruiser exploding. Looking directly at Barton, he said, "If you look at the battle as a whole, it is clear to me that this officer is a fine young commander. He's resourceful, he applies the things he's learned in his career, and with that resourcefulness and ingenuity, he did something I thought I'd never see; a tin can destroying a heavy cruiser and living to tell the tale."

"He got seventy-eight members of his crew killed," Barton said. "And he tried to get every single one of them killed."

MacIntosh immediately replied, "What was he supposed to do? Just sit and let the League ships present finish him and his division off?" MacIntosh picked up his personal computing device and waved it at Barton. "Colonel Meier believes the ramming maneuver won the battle and saved thirty thousand civilian lives."

"So he did it at a good time! Look at the man's history. First, his performance reviews are saying he's not staying in the service, and next he's a career officer? He wants to be the hero. He wants to be his father." Barton's voice dripped contempt. "He wants to go out in a blaze of glory, regardless of the cost. Why else would his first choice in this scenario be to *ram* another ship?"

"Ramming is not always a fatal maneuver, General Barton. Otherwise, we'd not be considering a court-martial right now," Andrews said, her tone relaying her increasing frustration with Barton's histrionics. "It does appear that Major Cohen's maneuver, while unorthodox and exceptionally risky, was very justified by the results of the action."

“I don’t believe this,” Barton said, his tone growing higher pitched; MacIntosh thought he realized that he’d lost the argument. “Am I the only one to see that this man has a death wish? At the very least, we need to take him out of a command position.”

“I can understand that,” one of the other generals said. “Maybe it’s best if we have him assigned to the officer academies? He does have solid front experience and could offer a lot to our command students.”

“At his age? He can do far better out on the front,” MacIntosh said. “And as soon as we get this matter out of the way, presuming a court-martial is not ordered, I intend to offer him a posting with my command as a CO.”

The rest of the generals on the review board looked at him with curiosity, but Barton exploded. “You can’t be serious!” he thundered. “You really *do* want to let this man cost us the war!”

“Given remarks you’ve made to us at times, General Barton, you’re not one to fling about defeatism accusations,” MacIntosh said levelly. “My command needs a young officer with a lot of ingenuity.”

“But he never went to command school,” the other general said. “He’s only commanded destroyers. His closest to command of a capital ship was an XO posting on a small carrier…”

“There are no better suitable commanders available as of now. I am certain of that.”

“This subject isn’t a part of our intended deliberation,” Andrews said testily. “The issue of General MacIntosh’s Victory Project is for him to decide with input from the general command staff and the defense ministry. Are there any further deliberations as to whether we recommend court-martial?”

“None, ma’am,” MacIntosh said, with slow nods from the rest of the board.

“Well then, it is time we come to our decision.”

As David, Gray, and the rest of his senior staff stood around, the door to the boardroom suddenly opened wide. A yeoman poked his head out. “Sirs, the board has asked for you to return.”

Gray nodded curtly at the young man. “Thank you, Corporal.” Gesturing to the door, he signaled for David to go in first. “That was a bit quicker than I’d expected,” he said. “Let’s go see what the decision is.”

Sheila gave David a reassuring hand on his shoulder as he stepped away.

He looked back at her and smiled. “It’ll be okay…whatever happens. God has some kind of plan; we’ve just got to stay on it.”

She smiled back as David and Gray both walked into the room.

David and Gray once again walked back to the defense table and took their respective seats. The corporal from before stepped forward. “All rise! This review board is now in session regarding the actions of Major David Cohen in the Battle of Sector 17A.”

David and Gray sharply stood at attention behind the table, waiting for the generals to walk in. After they all filed in and took their respective seats, General Andrews once again spoke for the assembled board. “You may be seated. This review panel is now in session.”

General Andrews waited for a moment, causing anticipation to build within David. “After deliberating the facts of the action on the 16th of August, the Special Review

Board has determined that the facts do not warrant proceeding to court-martial. That is all. This panel is now in recess."

David looked over to Gray and shook his hand warmly. "Major, thank you… thank you so much."

"Just doing my job, Major. Now you get out there and keep doing yours."

David smiled widely. "Will do."

As the two men talked, the corporal that served as the yeoman for the board approached. "Sirs, General MacIntosh requests your presence in his office as soon as possible, Major Cohen."

David nodded toward the young man and turned to Major Gray. "Please tell my crew I will be out to see them later. And thank you again, Major!" he said as he turned to leave with the corporal.

10

DAVID WALKED through a seemingly endless labyrinth of hallways, cubicle farms, and workspaces in the administration section of the Canaan Space Dock. After a few aborted attempts at small talk, he gave up trying to have a deeper conversation with the corporal he followed. Clearly the young man had other things on his mind and David wasn't going to force him to talk. Finally, after a fifteen-minute brisk walk, they arrived at a door with the name "*General Andrew MacIntosh - Project Director (Victory)*" on the side of the entryway. The corporal pressed the buzzer on the door, opening it in front of them. The corporal gestured for David to enter.

"Good day, sir, and good luck out there," he said and walked away.

A woman seated behind a desk in the front vestibule to the general's office stood. David noticed a nameplate on her desk that read "*Major Melanie Roberts*" and he figured she must be the general's adjutant. "Ah, Major Cohen. General MacIntosh has been expecting you. Please, follow me." He fell in behind her, sizing up her cheerful demeanor. He knew that these sorts of positions could be a real stepping stone in someone's career, as serving as an aide to a politically

connected flag officer could come in handy at the next review cycle.

As David stepped into the general's office, he braced to attention in front of the desk. "Major David Cohen, reporting as ordered, sir."

MacIntosh nodded in his direction. "At ease, Major Cohen. Thank you for showing him in, Major Roberts," he said toward his aide. "Major, I hope the wait wasn't too long while we deliberated?"

Roberts departed the room as MacIntosh thanked her.

"Not at all, sir. I'm just happy that I was cleared, and I hope I can rejoin the fight with the rest of my crew."

MacIntosh gestured at a seat in front of the desk. "You may sit, Major. David Cohen, or do you prefer David ben-Levi Cohen?" MacIntosh asked, looking briefly at a small tablet in front of him.

"The first is fine, sir." *Okay, why am I here for a personal discussion with a four-star? They'd don't acknowledge guys like me exist.*

MacIntosh returned his gaze to the tablet device on his desk. "Your father was Levi Cohen, the commander of the *Salamis*. Old destroyer, even when he took it out the last time, fit mostly for a mix of inexperienced crew and officers with old reservists." He leaned back in his chair. "I was at that battle as a staff officer under General Irvine. I saw your father's dying ship plow into the League flagship at full burn. It was the damnedest thing. An active career officer, and I saw a retiring reservist commander save Canaan."

"Yes, sir." David said, his voice taut.

MacIntosh looked back up, his eyes boring into David's skull. "You're prepared to make that kind of sacrifice?"

David nodded his head, and for a moment thought back to his father returning his salute in the front yard the night he flew off, never to return, the night before his birthday. "Yes,

sir, if I have to. But only if I have to. My duty extends to my crew, and to not waste their lives in pointless sacrifices."

"Well, Major Cohen, I'm going to give you an opportunity that no officer has ever been offered. I'm going to do it because I think you're the right man for the job, and it's up to you to prove me right."

David's mind continued to race, thinking that he was about to offered a post on MacIntosh's team. "What's the post, sir?"

MacIntosh grinned slightly. He walked over to the side of the room and raised a curtain, displaying an adjacent docking slip.

"This."

David got up and walked over to the window, looking out in awe at the massive ship in the slip. It was an old British Royal Navy Dreadnaught—the H.M.S. *Lion*, only she didn't appear to be an old ship any longer. There were hundreds of small craft and workers in space suits surrounding her hull, and the superstructure had been radically changed from the last picture he had seen of the *Lion*. There appeared to be new weapons emplacements, hangar bays, and an interesting structure amid ship that he had no idea what it did exactly. He turned toward MacIntosh, mouth agape, and eyes widened in shock. "I...I don't understand, sir. Do you want me to serve on that ship?"

MacIntosh shook his head. "No, son...I want you to *command* her. The CSV *Lion of Judah*. Our latest and greatest technological achievement."

David took a step back, shocked by the words that came out of MacIntosh's mouth. Doubts ran through his head; after all, he had just managed to win a battle by the skin of his teeth and lost many members of his crew in the process. This ship had to have thousands of crewmen on it. *I don't think I can do this. Could I keep my crew safe? That thing has to*

have thousands of souls on it. He began to shake his head slowly. "Sir, with all respect, I... I don't think that I have the command experience to run this ship."

MacIntosh turned back around to stare at David. "Few men below flag rank do these days, Mister Cohen. It's been too long since we started moving toward the lighter, carrier-centric fleet. Back then, we had advantages that we thought could let us win the war without bankrupting the Coalition. Instead, we just ended up buying time." MacIntosh walked back toward his desk. "Our carriers destroy an invading task force and they send two to take its place. One of our units is slightly out of position and they jump in and invade a world on us that takes years and hundreds of thousands of lives to regain. Sometimes millions."

"Freiderwelt." Seeing MacIntosh's look toward him, he added, "Lieutenant Goldberg was raised there. Lost her parents when she was sixteen."

"I see." MacIntosh gestured toward the window again. "Without ships like her back on the front, I don't know if we'll ever have the raw firepower to deal with the League."

David raised an eyebrow. "An old capital line ship? She's got to be at least twenty years out of date."

MacIntosh offered David a small smile. "She's not the same ship anymore, Major, not now with all that we've done to her. The largest magnetic cannons mounted on any ship in the fleet. The most up-to-date electronics systems, our longest-range engines, toughest armor, and strongest shield generators."

David began to raise the objections he had heard throughout his career in regard to why the CDF used swarms of smaller ships as opposed to large battlewagons. "Twelve or so reactors that demand constant attention and even one going down leaves you stranded?" David asked, retreading a long-ago argument.

“Four reactors, actually, and unless the main one goes down, you’re still more than combat capable,” MacIntosh said with a hint of satisfaction.

David’s eyebrows raised, and his nose quirked in surprise.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Sir, I know of no fusion reactor that powerful…” David let the sentence trail off, seeing MacIntosh’s face. “General?”

“Who said anything about fusion?” MacIntosh tapped a stylus on a tablet on his desk, indicating it was their next item of business. The document displayed on the tablet, a non-disclosure agreement, was the kind necessary to get access to highly classified materials that were considered special compartmentalized information.

“Are you in, Major?” MacIntosh asked.

David’s mind raced with the possibilities; one half of his brain thought he could command this ship and do it well, but the other side of his brain wondered, *But what if I screw up?* He pushed the thought aside.

“If this goes through, can I have my senior crew?”

“As officers on the crew?”

“Not just as officers, but as my senior crew.”

Seeing MacIntosh’s negative reaction, David said, “Sir, First Lieutenant Goldberg’s record as a tactical action officer puts her high on the fleet bell curve. Captain Hansen transferred to field operations after serving as a military engineer on an advanced reactor design team, so if you’ve got some fancy new power source for the ship, he’s a good pick for someone who can operate it. And as for Captain Thompson, she does know how to keep a leash on me getting too inventive.”

For a moment, MacIntosh didn’t fully respond, clearly pondering David’s arguments.

David held his breath.

“Well, I’ll give their records a final once-over and see if they’re willing to sign on, but I’m not making promises as to their final assignments. To be frank, on the matter of Captain Thompson, even if promoted, she will not be your XO. She will be permitted to be a senior watch officer and navigation officer only. Take it or leave it at that, Major.”

After a slight hesitation, David nodded, reached forward, and picked up the stylus to sign his name to the form. When he finished signing, he put the stylus down to find MacIntosh’s hand extended. He took it and the men firmly shook hands.

“Welcome aboard, Major.” MacIntosh grinned slightly. “Although ‘Colonel’ may be more appropriate now, at least as soon as you are cleared and permitted to formally join the project. I should have an answer soon. When there is one, you’ll be getting a call, assuming that you will be staying planet-side?”

“I was going to visit my mother this evening. She is the only family I have left,” David answered. “The contact number for my private cell and for my mother’s home is in my personnel file.”

“Of course. I’ll be seeing you soon, Major. Dismissed.”

David braced to attention for a moment, then walked out of the room, his mind racing with excitement at what he had gotten himself into.

11

David sat aboard his helicar for the forty-five-minute flight to his mother's home, while the autopilot flew him without input. He pulled out his specialized secure tablet, opening the file from General MacIntosh containing the *Lion*'s technical specifications, and read the ship's high-level operating manual. It was clear that many hundreds of billions of credits had been spent on the technologies that went into the *Lion*'s defensive systems, offensive weaponry, and support systems. To begin with, the ship had a power plant that rivaled a smaller planet's power grid; at full power, the anti-matter reactor system was capable of putting out more power than the fusion reactors of fifty destroyers. CDF engineers had clearly then scaled up the engines, shields, and weapons already in existence to match the power output supplied by this new reactor.

Interrupting David's reading, the video communication program on his tablet flashed. He traced his finger over to the icon, and it showed that Lieutenant General Benson Pipes was calling him. *General Pipes? I haven't heard from him in a couple of years.* They had kept in touch as much as the war would allow after David completed OCS. *I've gotten some*

of the best advice I've ever received from him. I wonder what's going on.

David pressed a button on the screen of his tablet, and General Pipes' smiling face appeared on his tablet. "David, can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," David said with a wide smile.

"Go for secure."

David entered his personal identification number and fingerprint into the tablet. "Secure mode engaged, sir."

"I understand that you've been offered command of the CSV *Lion of Judah*."

I thought that was classified. "Uh, yes, sir."

General Pipes laughed. "Don't worry, David. I'm cleared. General MacIntosh spent a good while discussing your abilities with me. I want you to know how proud I am of you, son. You've really taken off."

There was something about the way General Pipes said how proud he was of David that made him wonder what his father would have said. David knew he would've been proud.

"Thank you, sir. Much of that is thanks to your good counsel."

"You're a smart kid. You would've figured it out."

David smiled. "But I didn't have to make as many mistakes because of your advice."

"Well, thank you for that, David. Seems like they've given you a big ship."

"Beyond big; the biggest ship in the CDF. I've never seen anything like it. It's got ten three-barreled magnetic-cannon turrets, and since each one is five hundred millimeters in diameter, this thing can throw more projectiles than any ship in the fleet. The ship also has four particle cannons that are spinal-mounted, pointing dead center forward too. Testing suggests that those weapons can go in one side of a League capital ship, and out the other."

“That’s a lot of firepower.”

“To say nothing of its secondary energy weapon armament, our standard neutron beams, only because of the reactor attached to this thing. They’re far stronger than anything you or I have previously used in combat. There are missile cells, massive amounts of point defense…”

“Highly augmented shields powered by the anti-matter reactor give it a higher protection rating than anything in the fleet. I reviewed the tests earlier today myself. What’s its downside, David? Remember that everything has a downside.”

“Typically, a military vessel tries to do one role really well. This ship tries to do all roles well. It’s got hangar space and launching ability for one hundred and eighty combat space craft, and it also holds a Marine Expeditionary Unit.”

“And in trying to do everything, it might do none of them to the degree we’d like to see,” General Pipes concluded.

“Exactly, sir. But still, it’s an incredible feat of engineering. You know engineers… always trying to build a better mouse trap.”

“The good news is they built one. Now we need a commanding officer for her that can make use of this hodgepodge of a ship design and take the fight to the League. Have you decided if you’re going to accept?”

“I signed, sir, but I’m concerned I will be in over my head.”

“Wrong answer, son. I’ve known from the moment I met you that you would go on to do some great things. This is your time; this is your calling. Take command of this ship, make it into the weapon it can be, and use it to help defeat the League. Anything else is not acceptable.”

David sat back in his chair; General Pipes’ words were said with kindness, but they were direct. “I’m not sure if I’m ready, sir. That ship is…it’s all the marbles.”

“If we wait until we’re ready for something… we’ll never do it. You may not be completely ready for this kind of command. But you’ll figure it out. I’ve seen you do it time and again.”

David nodded his head. “Yes, sir.”

“Give my regards to your mother. Godspeed, David.”

“Godspeed.”

The link cut out, leaving David alone in his thoughts for the final few minutes of his flight.

David’s helicar set down in the driveway of a small suburban home just outside the capital at his mother’s residence. It was the same small house he had grown up in. He’d offered to help his mother move many times, but she clung to their residence and to the memories of Levi contained within it. The driver’s side door opened automatically, and he got out. Visits to his mother’s home were usually bittersweet, her concern about his wellbeing always foremost on her mind, followed by the inquiries about him settling down and having a family. David knew his mother wanted grandchildren, but he had no interest in marrying and starting a family while the war was on. It wasn’t to say he’d never been in love, but a lifetime of wondering if the person he loved was going to come back from a patrol alive or wondering if he would return to find that they had left him caused him to table the matter until he found himself at peace with the universe and no longer having to go off to fight a war.

He walked up to the front door, and the automated security cameras notified his mother of his arrival. Flinging the door open and overjoyed to see him again, she said, “David! Oh, it’s so good to see you!” They embraced and she

stepped back, wearing a smile. “Video chats are great, but nothing is quite the same as seeing you in person.”

David winced at his mother’s choice of words. “You know how it is, Mom…we’re on patrol for two straight years. I’m only home because of…” He trailed off for a moment, not wanting to tell his mother how close he came to death. “…of that battle.”

“Come sit down,” she said he followed her into the living room. It hadn’t changed much from the last time he had visited. A picture of the three of them was displayed on the mantel, along with a few pictures from his childhood. His mother had not changed the décor in her home in more than thirty years. While he was not quite sure why she didn’t update the house, she seemed quite happy and that was what mattered. David went to great lengths to make sure that his mother did not need for anything, sending her a good bit of his salary since he only maintained a temporary apartment planet-side when he came home from deployment.

“They talked about you on the news.”

“Ah, I wasn’t aware I’d made it to the news,” he said, trying to get her smile to return.

“David, they said you won the battle by ramming another ship.” She looked straight at him with a clear look of concern.

“It was the only way left to defeat the enemy, Mom.”

Sarah nodded. “I worry about you so much.”

David fought back emotions. “I know, Mom…but I survived. Too many of those who served under me didn’t… but I did.”

She stared at him for a moment. “You’ve got to stop blaming yourself when people die under your command,” she said, a rehash of conversations they’d had many times after each battle David returned from, minus some of his crew.

“Are you *sure* you’re not a CDF counselor, Mom? Because they tell me the same stuff every time,” he said with a small laugh, trying to brush it off.

“You know everyone in the neighborhood is talking about it. Frances Weiss said you reminded her of your father.”

That struck a nerve with David. He sat back a little more heavily in his chair. He glanced up at the picture the three of them had taken on that fateful night twenty-seven years ago. “But I came back, Mom; he didn’t.”

She looked down for a moment and changed the subject. “How did your hearing go?”

David perked up at mention of the hearing. “I was cleared. General MacIntosh is offering me a new posting with his command.”

His mother’s expression lightened a bit.

The Victory Project, or “VP” as it was called, had been leaked to the news media several years before. Occasionally, something else would leak about it, detailing how the CDF was working on some new weapon or technology. The point had been to keep morale up, but some were not sure if it had succeeded. Every few years, the League started a new “Spring Offensive,” and would try to drive further into Terran Coalition space. Most of the time, the CDF would beat them back, but they would take losses in every battle. The entire war had turned into a vast battle of attrition.

“The Victory Project? Oh, that sounds wonderful. If you’re getting a posting there, will you be getting more time away from the front?” his mother asked, hope lacing her voice. He knew that she wanted him off the firing line.

“I don’t think so,” David said. Immediately, he saw her eyes drop and a frown form before she quickly covered it up. It made him feel guilty for continuing in his career. “You know how things are. I won’t even know what I’m doing for

them for a few weeks." *Not exactly the truth, but better than her worrying herself to death.*

"Oh, of course," Sarah said, still clearly worried. "Well, can you stay for dinner?"

David smiled. "I'd love to," he said, looking forward to his mother's cooking.

THE NEXT MORNING, David waited outside of MacIntosh's office fifteen minutes before he was due for his appointment. As the minutes ticked down, he rehashed the thoughts that had been running through his head for nearly the last eighteen hours. On one hand, he had confidence in his abilities; they were tried and tested. On the other hand, he was continually haunted by the losses of his crewmates. In the days after ramming the frigate, he couldn't close his eyes without seeing their faces flash in front of him. They invaded his dreams, turning them into nightmares each night as he tried to rest. In a mandatory follow-up with a CDF psychologist, he had refrained from saying anything about the images, but he knew he suffered from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, though he was far too stubborn to ever admit it.

Major Roberts walked out of MacIntosh's office, interrupting David's thoughts.

"Major, the general will see you now," she announced formally. As David nodded to her and began to walk by, she added, "Good luck. He's been looking for the right person for this job for many months. I hope for all our sakes that you are up to the task."

David stopped and looked at her for a moment. "Thank you, Major. I do too," he said, still not quite sure that he was

the right man for the task. He went through the open doors and into the office that lay beyond.

"Major, come in!" the large Scotsman said. "Or, should I say, Colonel?" His face broke into smile. "We'll have a formal promotion ceremony later, as well as a christening of the *Lion of Judah* once we're sure she's ready for primetime."

David's mouth curled into a grin as MacIntosh handed him a small case with rank insignia. David snapped it open and saw two gold birds—the rank insignia for a colonel. *How about that, full bird. I've got to be the first Cohen in a few generations to get a set of those.*

MacIntosh strode from behind his desk. "Allow me." With a minimum of fuss, he removed David's existing insignia and attached the new ones to his uniform. "Congratulations, Colonel. I'm certain you will justify my faith in your ability to command this ship." With that, he walked back to his chair and sat down.

David took his place in one of the seats before the desk.

"I expect to have clearance for your department heading officers in the next day or two. For now, I want you to meet me onboard this afternoon at 1400 hours. I'm going to introduce you to Dr. Hayworth and break down the schedule for a space trial. I'm hoping to have her under way for the trial within the next two weeks."

David nodded toward MacIntosh. "Aye aye, sir. *The* Dr. Hayworth?"

MacIntosh nodded with a smirk. "Yes, *the* Dr. Hayworth."

David raised an eyebrow. "We're talking about the guy that gets on the holonets and debates people, calling them silly if they express a belief in God? About the only thing I've got in common with him is my disgust for the League."

"Yes, I realize putting the good doctor under the command of an Orthodox Jew might be interesting, but he's the best we've got. His ego and condescension

notwithstanding, I expect you to work with him. Do I make myself clear, Colonel?"

David set his jaw. "Crystal, sir."

MacIntosh looked down at his schedule. "Very good, Colonel. I'm moving on to my next meeting. You are dismissed."

David quickly stood, bracing to attention for a moment before turning to leave the room.

12

SHEILA STOOD OVER A SMALL, squat gravestone in a military cemetery on Canaan, the grave of her ex-husband, Curtis. Thinking over the days that she spent with him, she reflected on how her life had changed over the years. Hearing a rustling behind her, she turned to look behind her and saw David approaching with a smile.

"I pinged your comm. It said you were here," David said.

"I feel like I owe it to him visit at least once a year."

"I understand." *Is that regret in your voice, David? All you would've had to do is ask me to go on a date.*

"Even though it didn't work out between us, I still loved him. God, it hurt when his sister told me he'd died in action."

David nodded, looking down. "So many we've laid into the ground."

"Too many."

"MacIntosh offered me a new command."

"Oh? Do we get another destroyer?" she asked, a smile breaking onto her face.

David smiled and shook his head. "No." He paused for a moment. "A battleship. Something new. Big."

Sheila's jaw dropped as she shook her head. "So you ram a League ship and you get command of a battleship? Maybe if you ram that into something, then they'll give you a carrier!" At the sight of the dark look that crossed David's face, she apologized. "Too soon?"

"Far too soon."

Sheila put her hand on his. "I'm sorry. You know how I deal with pain."

David squeezed her hand. "It's okay. I'm just trying to consider if I'm the right man for the job."

Sheila's eyes bored into David's. "Why wouldn't you be?" *You're the finest commander I've ever seen.*

"I've never held more than the XO position on a capital ship—"

"Oh no, Major Cohen. Don't you start that with me. You know how to lead. You can lead anyone, anything, and cause the group to be far more capable than the sum of its parts. Whatever this new ship is, it might be a challenge, but it is nothing you can't handle."

David smiled. "I'm going to have to find a way to keep you around. Talking to you is far better than talking to a counselor."

Sheila laughed. "Well, if you need an XO…"

David pursued his lips together in a frown. "General MacIntosh refused to allow me to have you as the XO, but he did allow me to bring you on, if you want to, that is, as a senior watch officer and the ship's navigator."

Sheila nodded thoughtfully and paused for a moment before answering. "Well, if that's all he'll allow, that's what I'll do. I do love flying ships, you know." She knew in her heart that she would do almost any job requested of her to serve on the same ship as David.

His smile brightened. "Well, great. I'll let the general know."

“Got any plans for tonight?” she asked.

“None. I had dinner with my mother last night, and most of my friends are off-world on patrol.”

“Care to join me, then? There’s a new restaurant I want to try that’s serving Turkish kabobs. I’ve been wanting to try it since our last patrol.”

David smiled. “Of course. What time?”

“Seven PM works for me.”

“I’ll see you then,” David said and he walked away.

Watching him go, Sheila shook her head and wondered what she was going to have to do to get him to realize her feelings toward him. *Men*, she snorted to herself. *I’ll just have to draw him a picture one of these days.* A grin settled on her face as she walked back to her helicar.

Hanson sat in a small bar —a dive really— outside of the base gates called “The Ready Room,” which was clearly some attempt to be cute and attract pilots. Hanson didn’t care; he just wanted a place to have a drink and try to forget about the events of the last week. Sitting at a table in the back of the bar, he slowly nursed a small glass of A.E. Dor, his favorite brandy. The barkeeper walked up and Hanson held out his money chit and, without saying a word, the barkeeper slipped it under the bar and into a scanner to initiate payment.

“The same?” the barkeeper asked.

Hanson nodded.

As the barkeeper prepared his next drink, he kept asking questions. “So why so glum? They turn you down for a promotion?”

Hanson looked up. “Lost my ship.”

“Ah, well… at least you survived, right?” the barkeeper said.

Hanson had nothing to say, simply responding to the barkeeper with a blank stare and sad eyes, which prompted him to walk off after setting the new drink in front of Hanson.

Hanson looked down as a tone came from his personal communicator, seeing David’s name when he brought up the screen. Shaking his head, knowing he was slightly buzzed and hoping he didn’t regret it, Hanson sat down his drink and brought the phone up to his ear. “Hanson here, sir.”

“We got another ship.”

Hanson blinked for a moment. “Really? Cool.” Hope and excitement filled his voice.

“How about another posting as my chief engineer?” David asked.

Hanson’s eyes widened. He had thought they’d all be busted back to Second Lieutenant over the *Rabin.* “That’d be awesome, sir.”

“Great, I’ll get you cleared for the program. We’ll talk soon.”

“Yes, sir, let me know.”

Hanson hung up the communicator and returned to his drink, but now, a small smile crept across his lips.

13

ONBOARD THE CSV *PAT TILLMAN*, Major Hassan Amir glanced at yet another systems report in the cockpit of his space superiority fighter. His HUD showed there was another nineteen minutes to noon prayers. *Amusing that I'm so bored I'm counting down the minutes to pray.* He was the Carrier Air Wing Commander, also known as the Carrier Air Group (CAG) hundreds of years ago in the wet navies of the United States and Great Britain. The title was an example of something that, despite many years, hadn't changed in the military along with such things as doing paperwork in triplicate or hazing of the newbies. Amir's squadron, the 85th Space Fighter Squadron of CDF Space Combat Command, was known as the "The Grim Reapers," or the Reapers for short.

Currently, the entire air wing of the *Tillman* was at Ready Five status; they were strapped into their fighters and ready to launch as soon as the *Tillman* entered the engagement area. Amir had been strapped in for the better part of two hours, and the sheer boredom killed him. "Reaper One to Tiger One," he said into his comm unit.

The clipped British accent of his deputy air wing commander, Captain Rebecca Tulleny, answered him. "Tiger One here."

Amir keyed his mic again. “I’m bored to tears, and in need of a bio break,” he said with a snort of derision.

“We’re in fully enclosed suits for a reason, Major. Just let it out,” Tulleny said back with a played up cheery air.

In the middle of their exchange, the commanding officer of the *Tillman*, Colonel Patrick Forrester, cut in. “Attention Air Wing, we have arrived within the battle zone and have confirmed over one hundred bandits. I say again, over one hundred bandits. All fighters launch! Launch! Launch!”

Amir keyed his mic and turned the channel to the “Air Boss,” the officer responsible for overall flight operations once the commanding officer gave the order to launch. “Boss, request permission to launch!”

After a brief pause, he heard her response broadcast to all channels. “This is the boss. Fighters, launch by squadron. Reapers first.”

As he was the first in line to launch, Amir turned up his throttle and punched maximum thrust. He felt the G-forces through his harness, even though his entire flight suit and cockpit was designed to minimize all G-force discomfort. The thrusters on CDF fighters could push 15-Gs or fifteen times the force of one earth gravity, which without the specialized flight suit and harness, would kill a normal human almost instantly. The fighter raced out of the side of the carrier, followed by dozens of others—six squadrons in all, consisting of space superiority fighters, a squadron of bombers, as well as interceptors designed specifically to engage enemy fighters and bombers.

Amir waited for his squadron to get into space and ticked down the seconds as the flight of CDF fighters they piloted, known as the SF-106 Phantoms, ran through all safety checks for vacuum operation. As soon as his onboard computer system showed green for his squadron, he keyed his mic. “This is the CAG, Reapers, form up in echelon

formation. We're going to perform close escort for our heavies. Fighter squadrons, engage the bandits."

Amir's communications system lit up with green acknowledged messages from all fighters in the air group. Inside of the specialized HUD of the fighter he piloted, he could mentally call up information on any squadron and its status from the CDF tactical network.

Colonel Forrester's voice cut into Amir's communications net. "Major, I'm tasking your bomber squadron to engage Master Seven, the League carrier on station. Most of its fighter resources are committed, and our capital ships have degraded its escorts. We won't get a better chance to end this siege."

Amir keyed his mic. "Roger Wilco, Colonel." He switched channels back to the tactical net. "Alright, Reapers, you heard the man. Intercept vector Master Seven. We'll form a sphere around our bombers and guide them in. Weapons status is free." The weapons-free order allowed all the fighters in his squadron to engage any hostile bandit without requesting permission to fire as opposed to a weapons-tight ROE, or rules of engagement status.

It took several minutes for the fleet of CDF fighters to reach the engagement zone. Amir analyzed his sensor readings, compiled from all of the CDF ships and small craft in the area. He quickly realized that at least two squadrons of League interceptors had been sent toward his squadron and the bombers. He also took note that no less than eight squadrons rushed toward the rest of his fighters. Amir focused on the squadrons heading toward him; the rest was in the hands of his pilots, whom he trusted to perform at the most exacting of standards.

"This is Reaper One, tally ho, ten degrees port, fifteen degrees elevation, two squadrons enemy fighters!" Amir

announced into the communications net. “Stand by for maximum range and obtain a strong lock.”

Standard CDF fighter doctrine was to engage with active tracked LIDAR missiles from the forward arc and to use heat-seeking missiles when on an enemy’s rear, or “six.”

The missile tone sound filled Amir’s fighter as he made a positive weapon lock on one of the interceptors racing toward his flight. “Reaper One, Fox Three,” he said calmly into the mic as he pulled the missile launch trigger on his flight stick.

Similar announcements from other fighters in his squadron filled the communications channel. Missiles raced from both sides and electronic countermeasure systems, or ECM, jammed many of them before they could hit their intended targets, causing small explosions all over the battle space. Several from the CDF side hit, and Amir saw three League interceptor icons blink out, indicating hard kills, at the same time one of his own fighter icons blinked out. Amir silently prayed that his pilot had been able to eject in time.

“Reapers engaged, *Tillman*!” he said over the communications channel. “Reapers, break right and maintain covering fire for our bombers.” Amir angled his fighter downward relative to his location, aiming for another League interceptor. As he started the process of locking a missile on the inceptor in his sights, warning tones sounded in his cockpit. His fighter was now the target.

“Reaper One, you’ve got one on your tail!” one of his wingmen said through the commlink. “I’m moving to cover you!”

Amir angled his fighter in a high-speed turn, trying to outmaneuver the enemy craft.

“Reaper Six, guns, guns, guns!” his wingman called, indicating that he was engaging the League craft with the small neutron cannons mounted in his fuselage. Their

firepower didn't compare to the larger versions fielded by CDF capital ships, but they packed more than enough punch to deal with fighter-sized targets. After a couple of misses, a barrage of neutron cannon fire destroyed the League interceptor.

"Thank you, Six," Amir said into the mic.

He quickly looked at his threat display and locked on to the nearest fighter to him. Matching the League craft turn for turn, he gained optimum vector for a heat-seeker launch and announced, "Reaper One, Fox Two!" as he pulled the missile trigger. During the time Amir's fighter squadron was engaging the League interceptor squadrons, the bombers had closed in on their target to where they could fire anti-ship missiles at the League carrier.

He heard the lead bomber's pilot call on his communications channel. "Keep these bandits off us for just a few moments longer, Reapers!"

The bomber squadrons let loose multiple waves of anti-ship missiles. As soon as the last missile was away, they turned back toward the *Tillman* and executed a maximum thrust burn. Between the remaining League interceptors and point defense systems on the League's carrier, most of the missiles were destroyed before impact. The three made their way through to their targets caused additional explosions to blossom over several areas of the League carrier, telltale signs of secondary damage to fuel bunkerages and munitions. Despite the damage, Amir knew that the damaged carrier was still very much in the fight.

Then, something strange happened—the League fighters still in the battle space streamed back to the hangars of the carrier they came from, and the League ships throughout the area jumped out, disengaging from the fight. As the carrier faded from view, chatter filled the communications network.

“League ships are breaking off combat. They are retreating!” said an overjoyed voice Amir didn’t recognize.

“Thank you for stating the obvious,” Amir deadpanned.

“I’ve never seen the League run away from a fight like this before,” Tulleny said.

“The will of Allah can be mysterious.” Keying his mic to the channel for all squadrons attached to the Tillman, Amir announced, “All squadrons, return to home plate.”

14

MacIntosh and David stepped through the hatch into a large training room onboard the *Lion of Judah*; there was electronic sign on the door that said "Anti-Matter Reactor Briefing in Progress, led by *Dr. Benjamin Hayworth, Advanced Reactor Consultant—Victory Project.*"

David took up a standing position in the back of the very full room, taking in the view of dozens of CDF officers, contractors, and academics observing the briefing along with MacIntosh, drawing a glare from Hayworth as they arrived late.

Hayworth paused for a moment, seemingly to ensure everyone knew that they'd walked in before the briefing started before continuing his presentation. "As you see, the process of anti-matter or matter annihilation provides a much higher level of energy than any fusion reactor system. Although the quantities of anti-matter fuel available are low, the potential for this technology to revolutionize power generation in starships is extremely promising. Our latest advancements—some of which are sadly classified, I must remind you—would also increase the safety of this volatile fuel source in all stages, generation, storage, transport, and

use, making this technology highly economical for the power it generates."

A major wearing the insignia of an engineering duty officer spoke up. "Doctor, what about Dr. Gossel's advancements regarding the mining of the hydrogen reserves of gas giants? Don't they provide an excellent fuel source for starships as well?"

Hayworth turned to look at the man, leveling a withering stare on the offending questioner. "Dr. Gossel underestimates the difficulty in extracting such resources with our current generation of starships. Nor does his concept promise to relieve the need for massive, uneconomical numbers of fusion reactors in large-scale starships, unlike anti-matter reactors."

A young woman in civilian attire spoke next. "How safe are negmatter reactors?" she asked in a bright voice, very much engaged in Hayworth's presentation.

As soon as the word "negmatter" left her mouth, Hayworth's face turned to a scowl. He directed a fierce gaze at her. "'Negmatter?' Young lady, if I hear you utter that term again, I'm going to speak to a supply officer about procuring a dunce hat for your use! 'Negmatter' is a horribly unscientific, ridiculous term, and I shan't have it bandied about within earshot! It doesn't even deserve the dignity of being considered a layman's term for anti-matter." Grumbling, Hayworth nevertheless collected himself. "As for your question, as safe as any technology using altered matter that annihilates its exact opposite can get. But it's no more dangerous in practical terms than any standard fusion reactor or, more accurately, an old-style fossil-burning sea ship."

David whispered toward MacIntosh, "Quite a piece of work. And he's my chief engineer?"

MacIntosh glanced at David and smirked. “Chief engineering consultant. Hayworth’s the only man in the Coalition with hands-on experience with this technology. Unfortunately, that means you’ll have to put up with that infamous ego of his.”

“Doctor Hayworth,” an older man midway to the back said, standing and waving. “I’ve followed your accomplishments in this field with great interest. To finally see this technology…”

“Get on with it,” Hayworth said, cutting him off.

“Ah, well, uh, Doctor… what about the destructive potential of anti-matter? Can you see it being adapted to create better warheads for our missiles?”

“I don’t create weapons. Next!”

Another man stood. “Doctor, given the cost of creating anti-matter in meaningful quantities, how can we ever expect to get this technology out to the entire fleet? Wouldn’t it be better to focus our energy on more refined fusion reactors?”

“Six hundred years ago, you’d be arguing for better breeding of horses to ensure they were more muscular and could keep up with the car. Fusion technology is just that—old and outdated. The future is anti-matter and in time, we’ll have more of it than we could possibly need.”

David wondered if they were gluttons for punishment.

After another fifteen minutes of back and forth, which Hayworth clearly enjoyed, he glanced at the clock. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve hit our time limit for today. I look to see you again in the future and hope you will have studied the material more thoroughly.” Everyone filed out except for Hayworth, MacIntosh, and David. MacIntosh raised his hand to catch Hayworth’s attention and motioned the doctor over. Gesturing to David, he said, “Doctor, this is Colonel Cohen. He’s going to be commanding the *Lion of Judah*.”

Hayworth took a moment to look David over. “Awfully young for this job, aren’t you?”

MacIntosh shifted his weight and stared at Hayworth. “Colonel Cohen is a veteran of—”

“Oh yes, veteran of this campaign and that. I’m well aware of how young our veteran officers are getting, General.” Hayworth appraised David closely. “So, Colonel, are you aware of the significance of your vessel’s power source and advanced technology?”

David stared at Hayworth, making a mental determination that showing any personal weakness to this man could prove fatal in dealing with him down the road. “I’ve read the engineering briefing and explanation of the benefits and risks of this technology, Doctor. While I make no claim to be a scientist, there seem to be some significant risks in carrying around anti-matter on a warship.”

“No more dangerous than the munitions you already carry,” Hayworth said snappishly. “An anti-matter system will make up for any slight increase in internal volatility by significantly enhancing the power output of your vessel, enough to use a number of the latest, most efficient, and powerful deflector screen generators in our possession, which will, I remind you, enhance ship survivability.”

David bristled in spite of himself. Mentally determining he didn’t like the man, he responded in a more direct tone. “I’ve found that no matter how much engineers and designers tout a ship’s survivability, it usually comes down to how good the crew is.”

“Well, of course it does,” Hayworth retorted, giving off an air of having fielded such remarks before. “A machine’s effectiveness is determined by the skill of the user. But that doesn’t mean the machine itself isn’t an optimized device.”

Hayworth paused for a moment, staring at the patches on David’s uniform left sleeve. Like all CDF members, David had

a patch at the top of the left sleeve that was the flag of the Terran Coalition; directly under it was another patch that denoted the nation-state he was from, which in David's case was the Republic of Israel, whose flag was a Star of David on a white background. Some members chose to substitute that patch with one for their chosen religion; it was also permitted under CDF regulations to wear a third patch with a religious symbol if so desired.

"Colonel, do you consider yourself a Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Jew? I'm assuming that you're not an Ultra-Orthodox since you serve in the military," Hayworth inquired with a smirk on his face, looking David straight in the eye.

David's face contorted into a grimace as Hayworth's words registered. *I'm not in the mood to have someone who doesn't even know me, insult my beliefs, especially when I put my life on the line to protect his rights.* "I'm an Orthodox Jew, Doctor. As for my Ultra-Orthodox brethren, they serve in other ways."

"By studying some book of fiction from four thousand years ago endlessly?"

MacIntosh looked between the two men, not saying anything. David had the sudden impression he was watching to see who would come out on top.

"Doctor, I would remind you that its considered scientific consensus that our universe is finely tuned for the life within it...so can you really say it's a work of fiction?" David said, a cocky smile on his face.

"Every piece of evidence that supposedly points toward that conclusion can easily be used to support the validity of the multiverse theory, Colonel."

"As I understand it, there is no proof of a multiverse existing. There is, on the other hand, clear, concise proof in our physical constants, that if N, for instance, was

significantly smaller, our universe would not exist." *Explain that, Doctor.*

Hayworth's face registered shock and he laughed. "Impressive, General. You found a military man that has a basic understanding of cosmology, even if he interprets it wrong. I thought we were fresh out of those."

Before MacIntosh could respond, David interjected, "Jews are taught to question, Doctor. I paid attention in science class, and I put my faith to the test. It has held up fine so far."

MacIntosh cleared his throat and cut in to end the debate. "Doctor, I'd like you to brief Colonel Cohen on how the ship's engineering section works."

As Hayworth paused, David realized that for the man's arrogance, he didn't seem willing to cross the flag officer that controlled the flow of his research grants. "Oh, yes, of course. Please, follow me. I'd like to introduce you to Major Merriweather," Hayworth said as he led the men down the hall to the engineering section of the ship.

Leading the way out of the training room, Hayworth walked down a series of passageways through the mammoth ship. David and MacIntosh followed at a distance. During the walk, MacIntosh asked, "So what exactly is N?"

David glanced at him and smiled. "N is the ratio of the strength of electromagnetism to the strength of gravity for a pair of protons. It's one of the six constants of the universe that govern our reality."

MacIntosh snorted. "The science stuff is over my head. Why exactly do you know this?"

"I love to read; that, and there was a kid in my class in middle school that acted just like the good doctor. I rather enjoyed debating various subjects with him and winning."

"Well, that's about the only time I've seen someone shut that pompous ass up. Congratulations."

David laughed to himself and found his mind wandering as they walked through the ship's passageways. After what seemed like fifteen minutes, but in reality, was less than five, they arrived at an office marked with an electronic sign displaying "Maj. Elizabeth Merriweather, Senior Project Manager." Hayworth walked through the hatch into the office, followed by MacIntosh and David.

Merriweather was seated at a desk inside her office. A woman in her mid-thirties, she wore a normal khaki CDF duty uniform. As the three walked in, she looked up and belatedly jumped to her feet, bracing to attention a couple of seconds after MacIntosh entered. "Sir! Apologies, sir," she said as her face turned red.

MacIntosh offered a small smile. "At ease, Major. I recognize the result of being around civilians too long."

Merriweather relaxed as Hayworth made the introduction to David. "Colonel Cohen, this is Major Elizabeth Merriweather from the CDF's Advanced Engineering Department. Eliza has been on the project from the beginning."

David stepped forward and offered his hand. "Major, good to meet you."

"Likewise, Colonel," Merriweather said, taking his hand and shaking it firmly.

"Colonel Cohen is newly assigned as the commander of the *Lion*," Hayworth explained. "We need to bring him up to speed on the anti-matter system."

"Oh, of course. Allow me, Doctor." Eliza tapped a button on her desk and a hologram popped up, showing a hydrogen atom with a plus sign on it. "Basically, anti-matter is matter with a reverse charge to normal matter—the electrons have a positive charge and the protons a negative charge. When anti-matter and matter come into contact, they annihilate each other, producing energy. The potential energy release

from this reaction is as high as one hundred orders of magnitude above that of a fusion reaction. Of course, anti-matter occurs very rarely in the universe and is usually annihilated almost instantly due to contact with normal matter, so we have to create it through specialized particle accelerators."

"Wouldn't it just be destroyed after creation when it comes into contact with normal matter?" David asked.

"That's where the magnetic containment comes in," Merriweather said. "You can keep anti-matter isolated through a magnetic field. We've already successfully concluded tests with magnetic field containers for anti-matter that will serve as your ship's fuel bunkers. They're quite safe, Colonel, I assure you."

"Maybe in normal operation, but what about in combat?"

"The bunker space is within the ship's armored keel, as is the center point of the reactor. Though I believe it best if I finish these explanations in your tour of the ship. It might be a bit easier to understand if you can actually see what we're doing to her."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," MacIntosh said as he nodded to the two engineers and then turned to David. "The tour is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. I trust everyone can accommodate that?"

"Actually, I have a lecture at…" Hayworth started to say, and then noticed a dirty look from Merriweather and immediately began to shift what he was saying. "…but I believe Dr. Hart can fill in for me in the later lectures."

"Very good, Doctor. Have a lovely day," MacIntosh said with a smirk as he walked out, leading David out of the office with him. "You're going to have your hands full with that one, Colonel."

THE CSV *OXFORD* was technically not a warship in the Coalition Defense Force, but instead a technical research ship, as she was outfitted with a pinpoint sensor suite, extensive listening equipment, and a large complement of intelligence analysts. Tasked to patrol far behind the front lines, the *Oxford* was a CDF intelligence vessel for spooks and run by spooks. Sitting in the center of the large operations center floor that took up several decks of the ship, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Sinclair glanced up at the large plaque mounted in the center of the holoprojector displays that proclaimed the motto of CDF Intelligence: "In God We Trust, All Others We Monitor." For some reason, reading that always brought a smile to his face. Looking back down to a decryption program that ran on several intercepted League transmissions, he watched as the progress bar ticked one more percent.

"A watched decryption never finishes, sir," Second Lieutenant Alon Tamir said, unable to keep the hint of a grin off his face.

"I don't recall asking your opinion, butter bars," Sinclair said back in his polished English accent. Tamir thought he enjoyed poking fun at him and hoped with time he might end up earning his respect with this abilities.

"Of course, sir."

"Did you finish composing an analysis on those reports I gave you earlier?" Sinclair asked.

"Yes, sir, it's in your inbox."

"What's the BLUF, butter bars?" BLUF stood for bottom line, up front.

"That the League fleet in this sector has limited supplies to carry out ongoing offensive actions, so we should plan a counterattack immediately before they're able to resupply," Tamir responded with a smile.

“Good. Same conclusion I reached, but maybe you’re learning something on this tub.”

“Perhaps great minds think alike, sir?”

Sinclair narrowed his eyes. “Keep dreaming.”

Tamir took the pokes in stride, as the *Oxford* was legendary in the fleet for its practical jokes. Tamir had even heard at one point a group of chiefs had taken the entire contents of the XO’s quarters and arranged them on the outer hull exactly as his quarters was set up. The story went that the XO had left it all out there for a week before the ringleader fessed up and moved everything back. At some point, there’d be another newbie on the ship, and that person would get the attention rather than him. He really looked forward to that day. “Yes, sir!” he replied with a grin on his face.

Tamir’s console beeped, showing a League communication being intercepted. Turning his attention to his console, he noticed that the transmission lacked normal League encryption protocols. “Colonel, I’ve got an unencrypted League transmission, sir.”

Sinclair snorted. “Probably a propaganda video. I’m in the mood for a good laugh. Put it up on the big screen.”

A few moments later, the flag of the League of Sol appeared on the main holoviewer in the operations center. It was quickly replaced by a white flag, and then transitioned to a man’s face. Tamir and Sinclair exchanged glances as the images changed on the screen. “This message is for the government of the Terran Coalition,” the man began. “I am Diplomatic Minister Carl Jenner of the League of Sol Social and Public Safety Committee.”

As he spoke, Sinclair snorted again. “Oh great, they want us to surrender. Not bloody likely.”

“For the last twenty-seven years, our respective militaries have fought and died in a galaxy-wide war. The

League of Sol believes that now is the time for us to set aside this mindless slaughter and try to find common ground between humanity."

Tamir's eyes nearly popped out of his skull. *Is this some sort of sick joke the comm techs are playing on us?*

"The League of Sol realizes that an overture for cessation of hostilities after so many years may be difficult to comprehend. To prove our sincerity and good will, we propose to return five thousand prisoners of war to the Terran Coalition and send a ship with them and our delegation to Canaan for the purpose of a negotiated peace that is acceptable to both sides. As a further gesture of good will, the League will halt military operations in Terran Coalition space for the next five days while this proposal is considered. We await your response."

The transmission ended, leaving only a blank screen in its wake. The operations center was very, very quiet as officers and enlisted personnel looked at each other, not sure what to make of what they saw.

Sinclair cleared his throat. "Okay, which one of you put that together? That's got to be the best prank ever pulled on this ship."

No one answered him. It began to sink in with Tamir that what they just saw was perhaps genuine.

"Lieutenant Tamir, can we confirm that the signal originated from League territory?"

Tamir had been working on that problem before Sinclair had asked him. "Yes, sir, I can. Triangulation shows it originating from behind their front lines."

"Get me a gold level communications channel to the SecDef, Lieutenant."

As Tamir moved to comply, he realized he had been referred to as Lieutenant for the first time this week, and not butter bars. "Yes, sir!" Perhaps the League wanted to end the

war. The implications were incredible and Tamir fought to keep his excitement in check so that he could focus on the task at hand. A few minutes passed as the link was made. “I’ve got the Secretary of Defense’s office for you, sir.”

Sinclair turned and faced the camera for the communications video link. “Mr. Secretary, you’re going to want to sit down for this.”

15

MacIntosh glanced at David, who was sitting in front of his desk, then he turned his gaze toward the *Lion*. She was visible through the transparent metal windows that looked out upon the nearby dock. *Cohen better be the right one*.

MacIntosh finished pulling up a file on his tablet and cleared his throat. "Colonel, the clearances of your preferred command crew have been approved. That leaves the other officers being assigned."

Before David could speak, an intercom on MacIntosh's desk went off. "General Barton is here to see you, sir. He insists that it is urgent and cannot wait," Roberts said.

"Let him in," MacIntosh said with more than a trace of annoyance in his voice.

The office door opened and in walked General Barton. He braced to attention respectfully as MacIntosh and David stood. David braced to attention as well. "General, I wasn't expecting you so soon," MacIntosh said with an edge to his voice. "Colonel, I'll get back to you later. You are dismissed."

David relaxed. "Yes, sir," he said and quickly exited the room, glancing at Barton as he left, wondering what caused the interruption.

With David gone, the two men sat down. Barton sat in the chair in front of MacIntosh's desk that David had just vacated.

"You've told him there's no way he gets his command crew where he wants them, correct?" Barton asked.

"Of course."

"Ah, good. Wouldn't want to make him feel spoiled, would we?" Barton said with a touch of a sneer on his face.

The two men looked at each other intently. "General Barton, if this is about…" MacIntosh began.

"…his unfitness for this kind of command? Not really." Barton cracked a smile. "You know as well as I do what this project really is. 'Victory Project' sounds all nice and optimistic, but it should be more like 'Last Gamble Project,' and you know it as much as I do. The only reason they're letting you pick that kid is because half the joint chiefs are convinced the technology won't work. Better to let the young colonel take heat for a failed ship design than a man who's about to get general stars and actually do some good in this war."

A look of dark amusement crossed onto MacIntosh's face. "You know, General, I thought you were simply overselling your part in the court-martial, but you really don't like Colonel Cohen, do you?"

"Like? That has nothing to do with it, Andrew. As far as I'm concerned, he's the perfect man for this project," Barton said. "As I said, you know as well as I do that this is hardly going to win the war. As it stands, if we're lucky, it won't bankrupt the Coalition before the strain on the fleet would anyway. And don't throw that old canard of 'defeatism' around." Barton leaned forward. "It's one thing to keep the morale of the public up, to keep them working overtime in factories and paying more for goods to help keep the war effort going. That's why nobody says these things in public.

But let's face facts. The Coalition is in a war that it'll be lucky to survive with a negotiated peace. We're not going to drive the League out with or without these new ships."

"You're being pessimistic."

"And you're being foolish. There are other matters we should be turning our energy to, not putting everything we've got into magical technologies to end the war."

"It's not magical; it works," MacIntosh said flatly. "Hayworth's team has proven consistently in the last six months the anti-matter reactor is everything he claimed it would be. All it took was the right amount of funds being applied so we could procure the right materials and the best people to work on it."

"Congratulations. One ship will not turn the tide of this war. Or need I remind you that with the start of the latest 'Spring Offensive' by the League, we're being pushed back across nearly the entire front," Barton said firmly, raising his voice.

"One ship isn't supposed to turn the tide of the war! It's supposed to become a symbol that drives morale back up and serves as a test bed for new technologies that can be implemented fleet wide…and that will turn the tide of the war," MacIntosh said, his calm façade breaking. *I hate political appointees. This man doesn't deserve the stars he wears. Without connections, he'd never made it beyond major.*

The intercom on his desk went off, and MacIntosh pressed the button to answer it with some irritation. "Yes?"

"This is Secretary Dunleavey's office, sir. He says it's urgent and he needs to see you right away," Robert's sing-song voice said through the speaker.

"We'll continue this discussion later, then," MacIntosh said.

16

Lieutenant Colonel Calvin Demood of the Terran Coalition Marine Corps, a tall, very well-built dark-skinned American of African descent, sat on the couch in his living room, flipping through a stack of medals. He looked closely at several; just seeing them recalled the events that led to each. Planetary defense operations, invasions of League-occupied worlds to liberate them back into the Terran Coalition, boarding operations, and everything in between for twenty-one long years of service. *Until a few minutes prior*, Calvin thought bitterly to himself. The time had finally come for him to retire in six months, and now that was being delayed. *Jess isn't going to react well to this development. Not even sure what I think about it.*

He leaned back on the couch, glancing around the living room in his relatively modest home on the grounds of Camp Fox, a large TCMC base situated in a remote area of Canaan. Its primary function was as a training ground for new Marines. Calvin had been in command of a training brigade for the last eighteen months.

Jessica walked in and saw him looking through his medals. She walked over and gave him a kiss as she sat next to him. "Putting everything away for retirement?"

Calvin stared at a medal he earned during one of his first deployments as second lieutenant for fighting off waves of League troops while protecting a group of wounded Marines whose corpsman had been killed by enemy fire. “They’re giving me new orders,” he said, letting the words fall out of his mouth before looking up at his wife.

Jessica’s face clouded over. “What do you mean ‘new orders’? You’ve got less than six months to finish at Field Command School…”

“They want me to take a new assignment overseeing an MEU connected with the Victory Project.”

His wife’s voice began to rise. “What? Why? They know you’re retiring in six months.” She turned to face him on the couch. “They know that, right?”

Calvin looked at her, steeling himself. “They also asked me to stay on for another three years.”

At that, Jessica’s emotions got the best of her. “Oh no! No! You’re not going to let them do this to us!” she shouted. “You said you were done; you were ready to settle down!”

Calvin struggled to respond to his wife’s outburst. He knew that, more than anything, she wanted him to get out of the military.

“I was, Jess. It’s just… It wasn’t just any request. This came straight from General MacIntosh himself. He wants me to lead the MEU on that ship they keep saying they’re building. It’s real. I’ve got to do this.”

Calvin reached out to take her hand, but she swatted it away.

Jessica just stared at him. “So that’s it, isn’t it? They raise the flag again and you go running off without a thought?” she asked, seething.

“I took an oath, baby.”

“You’re damned right you took an oath…you took one to me! You promised me this was the end! I want a child,

Calvin! I'm sick of wondering if you're not coming back every time you walk out the door! What about me?" she shouted.

"Jess…"

"I've been waiting for you to settle down for twenty damn years, Calvin! I'm tired of waiting!"

Flustered, and unable to say anything else, she stormed out of the room and into the nearby bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Calvin stood and went to the door, knocking on it. "Hon? Please, come back out. We can talk about this," he pleaded with her through the door. After more than a few seconds of silence, he stepped away and sat back down in the living room, looking at the tablet that held his new orders, shaking his head. *This posting had damn well better be worth it*.

David pulled his cover on as he walked onto the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*, taking in the sight of all the people working on the bridge, coupled with its combat information center (CIC). General MacIntosh had already given him the so-called nickel tour of the ship, but this was his first time alone on the bridge. Many technicians, both military and contractor, worked on various consoles and there were disassembled stations, wall panels, and cabling everywhere. Recalling his old days as damage control team leader, he walked over to one of the many stations that had cables and parts strewn around it. A CDF officer was under the console; David could just make out his rank as a first lieutenant.

"And what are we doing here, Lieutenant?" David asked.

The younger man poked his head up. "Trying to troubleshoot a short in the communications control system…

not enough engineers to go around, and the contractors are all focused on weapons and shields," he explained.

David found himself mildly amused as the young man's eyes glanced up, saw his rank insignia, and then dropped everything to stand and come to attention.

"Colonel, sir!"

A few other personnel now took notice of David and came to attention. He quickly said, "At ease, everyone. Carry on with repairs."

As the rest of the technicians and contractors on the bridge resumed what they had been doing, David returned his focus to the young man before him. Taking note of the name displayed on his badge, he spoke again. "So, Lieutenant Taylor, what station are you assigned to?"

"I'm the senior communications officer, sir. I arrived last night."

David took a seat at a console to the left of the communications station. "I see. I was assigned yesterday as well."

"Yes, sir. We're receiving a lot of transfer paperwork. Seems like the brass is staffing up the ship quickly."

"I haven't been able to review the service jackets of the senior personnel yet due to the volume. Got to love that one of the few constants in the universe is paperwork in the government."

Taylor chuckled politely. "Of course, sir."

Determined to draw something more than small talk out of the young man, David persisted. "So tell me something about yourself that I won't find in your service jacket, Lieutenant."

"Um, well, sir... I like to work on unbreakable cryptology problems in my spare time."

David smiled. *Hanson will like this guy. Natural born nerd.* "Okay, well, here's one that is in your service jacket...what's

your first name?"

Taylor turned a few shades of red. "Robert, sir. Robert Taylor."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm David Cohen."

"Sir, is it true you rammed an enemy ship in your last combat? We've been hearing a lot of scuttlebutt."

"Yes, it is. We rammed an enemy frigate, disabling it and saving a convoy of civilians from the League."

"That's impressive, sir. I wish I could have been there."

"Lieutenant, it was a desperate action that cost seventy-eight people on my crew their lives, but it was a gamble that succeeded. One thing it was not was impressive. And should you find yourself in a command position someday, remember that we hold the lives of those we lead in our hands. That is an awesome responsibility that should never be taken for granted."

Taylor gulped. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize."

"Nothing to be sorry about, Lieutenant." David felt his own face redden. He knew as soon as he finished saying it that he shouldn't have laid into the young man quite that hard. "To be clear, I'm not planning on ever ramming this ship into anything," he finished off, trying to lighten up the conversation.

A small grin eased its way onto Taylor's face. "Well, at least if you rammed a frigate with this ship…it'd be like smearing a bug on a windshield."

"That's the spirit, Lieutenant."

Just as David was about to take his leave, Taylor's comm unit went off. "Rob, you won't believe this!" a voice said that issued from it. Before Taylor could reach down and turn it off, the voice continued. "I just heard a rumor that the League wants to talk peace! They sent a message to our government!"

Both David's and Taylor's expressions changed in an instant to one of bewilderment and amazement. "Lieutenant, do we get Canaan News Network up here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pull it up, please. Maybe this rumor is on the news."

JUSTIN SPENCER, the President of the Terran Coalition, waited outside of the richly adorned conference table within the Canaan primary government center. Watching his ministers, leading generals, and advisors walk in and take their seats, he ran the events of the last several hours through his mind for the millionth time. Spencer had been elected eighteen months prior and was a member of the Liberal party.

The Liberals were known by different names on different planets in the coalition. On the British worlds, they were called the Conservatives or Tories; on the American planets, they were known as Republicans. Overall, the Liberals were the largest center-right party within the Terran Coalition.

Spencer had replaced the previous president, who was a member of the Liberal-Democrats, which was the largest center-left party. The Terran Coalition had numerous splinter parties, and neither of the mainstream parties could govern without a broad coalition. For many years after the start of the League/Coalition war, there had been broad consensus that produced unity governments. Over the last ten years, that consensus had collapsed. The Left favored limited military engagement with a focus on diplomatically ending the war while the Right favored increased military spending, a buildup of the fleet, and a policy of unconditional surrender by the League as the only acceptable end to the war. Spencer's coalition was made up of numerous center-right political organizations, including Likud from

New Israel, the United Arab League from New Arabia, and many others. Spencer himself had served in the military for ten years before getting out and going into politics. He strongly favored building up the Coalition Defense Force, and it was his leadership that provided a nearly unlimited stream of funds for the Victory Project. It didn't hurt that Spencer had at one point served under the command of General MacIntosh.

As the last invited member of the meeting took a seat, Spencer strode into the room. Immediately, everyone stood as a sign of respect for the office of the president. "Ladies, gentlemen, please be seated." Spencer was known for being a bit of a cowboy. He wasn't afraid to say what he meant or to shoot from the hip. Taking his seat next to Secretary of Defense Dunleavy, he nodded to begin.

"Mr. President, generals. I have asked for this meeting to discuss a new development in the war." Dunleavy paused for a moment. "Earlier this morning, we received this communiqué from the League." He pressed a button on his tablet and the message appeared on the tablets of all in the room, as well as the holographic projector at the back of the conference room.

Spenser looked up from it after a moment, his eyes wide. "A peace proposal with a joint proposal to the Saurians? But they've been steadily pushing us back with this new 'Spring Offensive,' as they keep calling it."

Barton leaned forward, a slight smile forming on his face. "I think this is the opening we've all been waiting for, gentlemen. Mr. President, I suggest we act on this proposal as soon as possible."

MacIntosh's face turned red as he listened to Barton's comments. "General, Mr. President, we cannot afford to look weak in the face of this offer. We must listen to what they

have to say, but we cannot just give them whatever they want."

Dunleavy made eye contact with Spencer before he spoke. "Mr. President, I am torn on this issue. While victory has been the goal of the Coalition Defense Force for the last twenty-seven years, an honorable peace that preserves our territory and returns the border planets lost to us is acceptable to me. I cannot stress enough, however, that I view any peace offering from the League with some measure of skepticism. We must consider, in my opinion, this offer to be a ruse until proven otherwise."

"That kind of mindset will continue this war until we're finally defeated and enslaved. Mr. President, we must seize this opportunity and exploit it for all it's worth, even if we don't get everything we want out of peace," Barton said, making his voice heard.

Spencer sat back in his chair. Of all the possible outcomes of the war, this wasn't one he had considered. He knew the Saurian Empire had been pressing the League to start peace talks. *Not that we ever thought they'd bear fruit. I figured the only reason the Saurians were trying to help us was to repay what they felt was a debt of honor.* "I understand the arguments on both sides, and I believe we've got to entertain this request. According to the communiqué, they would like to send one warship and a cargo ship with POWs, including the former president's daughter, to be turned over to us as a show of good faith, followed by being escorted to Canaan for these proposed peace talks. Any objections to that sequence of events?"

"Mr. President, I feel that we cannot allow a League warship within Canaan's defense perimeter. Even if it's not a ruse, they could gather intelligence on our static defenses and the home defense fleet," Dunleavy said.

“As commander of the home defense fleet, I feel those risks are overstated, Mr. Secretary,” Barton interjected. “Allowing a single ship in is an acceptable risk for peace. I suggest we send the *Ark Royal* to escort the League’s flagship to Canaan.”

MacIntosh leaned forward in his seat and glanced toward Spencer, “Mr. President, while I agree that we must entertain this peace offer, I suggest a different approach. Instead of the *Ark Royal*, I propose we send the *Lion of Judah*. She’s almost ready for launch, and a powerful new battleship appearing in front of the League will put us in a position of strength for talks, and it might shake them up a bit and put them off balance.”

“The *Lion of Judah*? The ship hasn’t even had a shakedown run yet. It’s not fit for duty or combat, and its commanding officer is questionable in a diplomatic situation. In his last combat, he rammed an enemy ship, for God’s sake! On top of that, General, do you really want to reveal our new technology and weapons platform to the enemy?”

“If it’s so unproven and not fit for duty, what harm could there be in showing it to the enemy, General Barton? As far as I’m concerned, the *Lion* is the best option and will keep the League off balance. Keeping them off balance during a diplomatic situation furthers our goals.”

“I agree with General MacIntosh,” Spencer said. Barton’s opinion carried little weight with him as a political appointee from the previous administration. *The man is a defeatist and I ought to have him replaced.* “The Victory Project has caused a lot of rumors for a while now both at home and within the League. A dramatic unveiling will help boost the morale of our citizens and shake up the League intelligence network. Andrew, can the *Lion of Judah* be ready for duty in forty-eight hours?”

MacIntosh nodded firmly. “Yes, sir.”

Spencer stood. “Then you have your orders, General.” Looking at Dunleavy, he continued. “Charles, get Andrew anything he needs, anything at all. If there’s any red tape, bring it to me and I’ll remove it. Via executive order if I have to.”

The assembled company bristled with energy as they waited to be dismissed, but Spencer had one more request for them. “If you all would, please take a moment and pray for the success of this endeavor.” He bowed his head with the rest of those in the room. “Lord, we ask you to bless this peace offering. Please grant strength, wisdom, and courage to all of us, and especially the crew of the *Lion of Judah* and her commander. Amen.” He lifted his head and looked at the men and women in the room. “Meeting is adjourned, ladies and gentlemen. Good luck, and Godspeed.”

17

SHEILA WAS in the *Lion*'s main engineering space, looking up at the massive anti-matter reactor and its associated fuel and cooling systems. Not much of an engineer, she was still wowed by the scale of the technology in front of her. From her eye, the reactor assembly looked larger than the entire engineering space on the *Rabin*. Hundreds of engineers and technicians swarmed over every foot of the space, many wearing CDF uniforms, but a surprisingly large number wore civilian clothes. The voice of Dr. Hayworth boomed out from the center of a group of engineers. "You idiot!" he shouted. "You're supposed to monitor the anti-matter mix and ensure it remains within the safe zone. Now get back to your stations and try again!"

She smirked a bit, listening to the man rant. David had warned her Hayworth was difficult, but she wanted to see for herself. As the group of engineers scattered, Sheila walked over to introduce herself. "Dr. Hayworth?"

Hayworth looked at her. "Yes? What can I do for you? Want an autograph?" he asked.

"No, Doctor. I'm Major Sheila Thompson, the *Lion*'s second officer." She extended her hand towards him, intending to shake his.

Hayworth looked at her hand for several seconds like it was from a different planet. Another female voice spoke from behind him. “Doctor! Remember your manners!”

Merriweather emerged from behind an engineering console; appropriately chastened, Hayworth took Sheila’s hand and shook it.

“Pleasure to meet you, Major.”

Merriweather extended her own hand. “Major Elizabeth Merriweather, CDF Special Programs division.”

Sheila took her outstretched hand. “Major Sheila Thompson, second officer.” After a moment, Sheila continued. “This is truly an incredible feat of engineering. I must compliment you both.”

Hayworth ran his eyes over her uniform. Noting a lack of religious insignia, he asked, “Can I count you among the enlightened, Major?”

“The enlightened?”

“Those of us who worship nothing but science.”

“I’m afraid not, Doctor.”

“A pity. So hard to find another that thinks like I do.”

Sheila fought not to roll her eyes at Hayworth, but Merriweather moved to defuse the tension. “Major, were you an engineer at some point in your career?” she asked.

“No…but I know what an incredible feat of engineering looks like when I see it,” Sheila said with a smile.

“It would be nice if the military stopped pushing me to complete this ship ahead of schedule. They’d be less likely to get a ship that breaks down on its first jump.”

Sheila had a hard time digesting Hayworth’s demeanor; it was clear the man was simply a jerk. “We still have two weeks before early trials start. I’m sure that’s enough time, from the reports I read this morning.”

Merriweather and Hayworth stared at Sheila for a moment. “Haven’t you heard, young lady?” Hayworth asked

in a smug tone.

Sheila shook her head. “Heard what?”

“CDF command wants this ship in space in forty-eight hours. Don’t you military types talk to each other?”

Sheila reached down and pulled up her personal communicator. Quickly skimming the messages, she found one from General MacIntosh to the command staff, calling for a staff meeting and asking for all departments to be ready to launch in two days. “I guess I missed that one. I had my communicator on silent this morning.”

Hayworth rolled his eyes openly. “I’ve got to get back to work to meet this insane deadline.” With that, he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Merriweather appear to try and smooth things over as best as she could. “I’m sorry, Major; the doctor is a bit temperamental. This project is his magnum opus to science, if you will. He’s put everything into it. Please excuse his behavior.”

Sheila smiled. *I wonder why she’s making excuses for him.* “Of course, Major. I’m sure he’s under a lot of stress. I’d better get to the bridge and check in with Colonel Cohen. Sounds like we’ve had a significant change in plans.” Her expression darkened. “I hope there hasn’t been a serious setback in the war. We don’t need that right now.”

“I know. I’ve been insulated from the war a lot by working for the special projects team, but I know we’ve been getting hammered in the past year.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve given it back just as much as we’ve taken,” Sheila replied with faux confidence. In truth, she was worried too. She didn’t know anyone in the service that wasn’t.

“Glad to hear. I’d better get back to work too, Major. Godspeed.”

“Same to you,” Sheila said, turning to walk away.

KENNETH LOWE, the assigned program manager from Strathclyde Shipboard Integrators for the shipboard systems installation contract for the *Lion*, looked over the message that just popped up on his tablet. He and his deputy, Joshua Carter, sat in a small office onboard the *Lion of Judah* that had been assigned to him by the program executive office. With over four hundred personnel, he had one of the largest teams of contractors on the ship. Kenneth had worked for SSI for nearly ten years, and at thirty-five years of age, he was the youngest senior program manager in the company. Assigned to the *Lion* out of spite for his insistence on following the Coalition Acquisition Regulations, Kenneth was something of an oddity. He came from a military family but didn't like taking orders he couldn't question, and had not renewed his enlistment after his initial draft period. That aside, he loved working for the military. Being a part of something larger than himself gave meaning and purpose to his life, and he took a great deal of pride in the idea that his work and the work of his team supported the men and women on the business end of the spear. As he quickly read over the message, his jaw dropped.

"Josh, I think we have a problem."

"What now, sir?"

"The program executive office for CDF Special Projects just instructed us to complete our work in the next thirty-six hours and have the *Lion* ready for deployment."

"You've got to be shitting me," Joshua said, causing Kenneth to raise an eyebrow. Joshua never cussed.

He passed the tablet to Joshua. "Have a look for yourself.".

After scanning the message, Joshua looked back up. "There's no way we can have this ship combat ready in less

than two days. They must want it to meet the League peace delegation we heard about earlier."

"You may be right…but we can't let them get out there without a working ship. I think we could have her ready in four days, if we worked twenty-four hours a day and nothing went wrong."

"But we don't have four days, boss."

"We do if we stay on the ship when it gets into space. It's at least two days' journey to our border, even with the upgraded Lawrence drives."

"It's not in our contract to be in the field, sir. Not only that, you know Casey won't let us do it without extracting overtime and hazard pay from the CDF…" Joshua said, his voice trailing off at the end.

Kenneth rolled his eyes at the mention of Stephen Casey, the SSI Vice President he reported to. Among all the people in SSI he had to report to, Casey was one of the worst. Seemingly focused on squeezing as much profit out of the military as he could, he'd come to loathe the man. In fact, he spent most of his job creatively figuring out how to get around his directives.

"To hell with Casey. I'm not letting this ship roll out of here without its systems working. Without fully functional shields, weapons systems, and the tactical network that links it all together, this thing is a flying coffin," Kenneth spat.

Joshua sat back. About ten years older than Kenneth, he was usually the voice of temperament, but this time, he was silent for a moment. "Are you willing to fall on your sword for that?" he asked.

Kenneth nodded firmly. "This mission might be the end of the war. If it costs me my career to ensure this ship's ready to meet the challenge, that's worth it to me," he said evenly.

“Then let’s get moving…and you don’t get to quit without me. They fire you, I’m right behind you,” Joshua said, grinning at the same time.

Kenneth laughed. “Have our leads pulse the entire team on who’s willing to stay aboard, and make sure they do not pressure anyone. This is strictly a volunteer assignment.”

At that moment, the door swung open and another man, Harold Billings, one of the leads on the *Lion of Judah* project, stuck his head in. Kenneth had nicknamed Harold “Master Chief” because he was older and had many youngsters on his team. “Hey, boss.”

Kenneth motioned him inside. “Good timing, Master Chief, come on in. We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

18

DAVID SAT at one end of the table in the main conference room onboard his new ship. Most of the senior command crew was present, including now Lt. Colonel Calvin Demood, Major Sheila Thompson, Major Arthur Hanson, First Lieutenants Ruth Goldberg and Shelly Hammond, the ship's third watch officer and backup navigator, as well as First Lieutenant Robert Taylor. Furthermore, the promotions for Sheila and Hanson had been processed and awarded. Major Elizabeth Merriweather was also in attendance, as she was assigned to the *Lion of Judah* for the duration of her shakedown.

Dr. Hayworth was absent, as David had ordered that the civilian engineer not be present for military command briefings. In truth, he didn't want the man around period, although he knew that he had no choice but to work with him.

General MacIntosh walked through the door at the far end of the room, followed by an older man also in a CDF uniform wearing a medical patch. The entire assembled staff stood and braced to attention. "As you were, ladies and gentlemen." At MacIntosh's command, they resumed their seats.

“Before we begin,” MacIntosh said, “I’d like to introduce everyone to Dr. Izmet Tural, the chief medical officer for the *Lion of Judah*. I’d give you time for introductions now, but we have urgent matters to discuss, so please be seated.”

Tural took a seat at an open chair while MacIntosh remained standing.

“Two days ago, League military operations across the entire front halted. All active combat operations were ceased, and troops pulled out of ten contested systems where the League commenced invasions. We’ve even gotten reports that on partially occupied worlds, the League armies have ended direct combat operations.”

Calvin spoke up. “Sounds like they’re planning something big. It could be ‘48 all over again.”

“That’s what we thought, but yesterday, one of our ships on patrol intercepted a League transmission. The League wishes to commence peace negotiations immediately,” MacIntosh said.

While it had been an open secret this was coming, it was still a shock to the members of the command staff. Taylor was next to speak. “Twenty-six years of fighting and they’re coming to the table now?”

MacIntosh nodded. “Yes, I understand your skepticism, but our intelligence, corroborated from those neutral states that still favor us, indicates the League is facing a crisis in their home systems due to their war footing disrupting their economy. There are forces in their government that have already made statements to the effect of needing peace to deal with internal dissensions and economic stagnation. We believe these elements have now come to the fore in the League government. A peace party is en route to our border to be brought to Canaan for talks. They are aboard a League dreadnought, the LSS *Destruction*, and are accompanying a

transport carrying a load of POWs to be returned to the Coalition as a gesture of good faith."

"They're really going to send a ship named like that on a peace mission?" Sheila asked incredulously.

"It's the flagship of their mission's overall commander. Admiral Pierre Seville."

David's expression shifted slightly. He recognized the name as the admiral who led the initial League assault on Canaan, the man his father gave his life in order to stop. "The man who led the initial attack on Canaan," he said hoarsely. "My father died ramming his flagship."

"One and the same. And you will be going out to meet him, Colonel."

David felt MacIntosh's eyes bore into him. "Sir?"

"The president and SecDef approved the proposal. We're sending the *Lion of Judah* out to escort them in."

"Sir, we're still in preliminary shakedown preparation. We're not even sure the anti-matter reactor will work properly in sustained operations."

"The thought is that if we send a carrier, we're simply reminding them of how we've devoted ourselves to a permanent defensive effort. But the *Lion*? She represents our new direction, a signal to the League that they need to take us seriously in the peace talks and afterward."

"Ah, so… the League is sending a ship named *Destruction* to negotiate peace with us," Sheila said, emphasizing the word "destruction," "and we're going to respond by sending a ship named after Jesus Christ to make peace with a nation of militant atheists. Is anyone else feeling a bit skeptical of our chances here?"

Various people chuckled among the assembled; even MacIntosh seemed amused, if in a subtle way. "There's nothing you can say about the ship's name I haven't already heard from Dr. Hayworth, Major Thompson."

“So we’re being sent. Do we have enough stores for the trip?” David looked to Sheila.

“We were bringing aboard parts and items needed for the shakedown cruise. It’ll take a day or so to check over the life support system and charge up the atmosphere reserves from the station supply, but we should be ready to go within forty-eight hours.” She glanced at Hanson. “Provided the engines are ready.”

“Dr. Hayworth and his crew should have them ready, but I’m not sure about our readiness to run the new antimatter reactor under full cruise conditions, much less combat,” Hanson said hesitantly.

“That’s why you’ll be taking Major Merriweather and Dr. Hayworth with you. She’ll oversee the operation of the reactor for the duration of this mission.” MacIntosh drew in a breath. “Listen, I know some of you are going to be skeptical about this. I am too. If anything suspicious happens, report it and keep your guard up, but I shouldn’t have to tell you that if we can put together a negotiated peace with the League, it would mean a lot for the Coalition.”

“An end to the war,” Calvin said slowly. “Demilitarization, no more military oversight in the border worlds, getting the civil services back up…”

“No more killing,” Sheila added.

“Let’s just hope they’re thinking the same thing,” David said. Sheila gave him an uncomfortable look, but he didn’t outwardly acknowledge it. “Okay, everyone, let’s get busy. We’ve got to be ready to go in forty-eight hours. Time is wasting.”

Everyone at the table nodded. “You heard your CO. Let’s get to work! Dismissed!” MacIntosh said.

The team stood to leave, and as they did, each stopped to welcome Dr. Tural to the ship and the crew. Sheila shot David a glance, raising an eyebrow in question to him, which, while

it was noticed, he opted not to respond to. He knew she was going to ask some very tough questions later about where his mind was at in dealing with Admiral Seville. After everyone else filed out of the room, David and MacIntosh were alone.

"Sir, our fighter and bomber squadrons aren't due for another two weeks. We'll be going out there without their support."

"We're going to arrange for you to rendezvous with the *Pat Tillman,"* MacIntosh replied. "They'll transfer some of their squadrons to you. You'll also be receiving your CAG, Major Amir."

"Hassan Amir?"

"Yes. You've met, I presume?"

"When I was the XO on the *Audacious*, sir. I'm looking forward to having him as my CAG."

"Well, that's good to know." MacIntosh retrieved a data disc from the wardroom computer. "I'll be keeping tabs on your preparation. You're getting top priority for everything you need to be ready for departure by order of the president."

"What about my XO?" David asked. "Major Thompson has been assigned as the navigator and second watch officer, but I haven't seen the service jacket of any XO candidates as of yet."

"You won't be getting your XO in time. For the time being, you can have the major functioning as XO. Use First Lieutenant Shelly Hampton as your navigator. She was to be the second shift navigator."

David nodded. "Thank you, sir. That should work out fine."

"Good luck out there, Colonel. We all pray this will be a success but be ready for anything. You should know that President Spencer, personally, led a prayer for your success in my presence."

David allowed a smile to cross his face. “I’ll take all the help I can get on this one, sir.”

MacIntosh turned toward the door. “Carry on, Colonel. Godspeed.”

19

"Are you sure I can't talk you out of this, General?" David said, pausing before the double doors that said "Studio C."

"We've been on this, Cohen. You're doing the interview," MacIntosh said, pointing toward the door.

"I'm a ship driver, sir—"

"So you've said, Colonel. Do I need to explain yet again to you that the *Lion of Judah* has as much morale and public relations value as it does in military might?"

"Point taken, sir," David said, resigning himself to the task ahead. He'd been trying to get out of the assignment for the last six hours, without success. *Why not at least get me onto a broadcast that's remotely pro-CDF*?

"I'll be in the broadcast booth upstairs while you handle the interview, Colonel. Remember to tout the *Lion*'s technology without revealing classified information, and to signal our support for the peace process."

"Yes, sir."

"Carry on, Colonel."

MacIntosh disappeared through another door, leaving David to push through in the studio. He found it teeming with employees of the news channel—Galactic News Network—and the reporter that he was to sit down with,

Leslie Sharp*. I've seen her reports, God only knows how many times. She's so slanted against the CDF, it's laughable*. Again wishing he was anywhere but the studio, he pulled his uniform jacket down one last time, put a smile on his face, and made his way to the interview chair. The chair was positioned directly in front of a desk, and behind it was Sharp.

"Ms. Sharp," David said.

"Colonel. Please, have a seat. Ready to go?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"It'll just be a moment."

There's something about her voice that's fake. David took a sip of water as the director of the show gave a countdown. When the count reached two, Sharp waited three seconds before speaking directly into the camera.

"This is Leslie Sharp with the Galactic News Network. Tonight, we have a special guest, Colonel David Cohen, commanding officer of the newly revealed CSV *Lion of Judah*. Welcome, Colonel."

David smiled toward the camera awkwardly. "Thank you, Ms. Sharp. It's a pleasure to be speaking with you tonight."

Leslie looked him in the eye with a one-hundred-watt, trademark holonet smile. The effect reminded David of a used helicar salesman. "Just to introduce you to our viewers tonight, how long have you been in the Coalition Defense Force, Colonel?"

"Twenty years, ma'am."

"I understand it's nearly impossible to make colonel after being drafted as an enlisted soldier. Sounds like you've had an exceptional career, Colonel."

David wasn't sure where she was going with this line of questioning. "I've done the best I can with the abilities given to me by God, ma'am."

“I see. Has the fact that your father was in effect the hero of the Terran Coalition helped your career along?”

David fought to keep a grimace off his face. “I wouldn’t know, ma’am. I’ve certainly never made anything of it. If anything, I’d rather it never come up. My father would have never considered himself a hero. He used to remind me often that some things, like our freedoms, are just worth fighting for. That’s what he dedicated his life to.”

“He sounds like a noble man.”

“He was.”

“I understand that in your last combat, you rammed an enemy warship?”

Alarm bells went off in David’s head. *What exactly is she trying to do*? “Ah, yes, I did, ma’am,” David said hesitantly.

“And why was that, Colonel? Ramming another ship is usually fatal, isn’t it?” She continued with the one-hundred-watt smile still at full blast.

“Because a League ship was bearing down on a group of transports with civilians onboard, and I had no other way to stop that ship from killing tens of thousands of civilians,” David said with a trace of an edge to his voice.

“I’m sure you can understand, Colonel, that billions of citizens around the Coalition want to make sure that this wondrous new ship we’re sending into space to meet the League is commanded by an able officer.”

“Of course, ma’am, and I will do my duty to the utmost of my ability. I think everyone in the Terran Coalition is praying that our next mission will be a success, and that we will achieve a peace agreement with the League of Sol.”

“Do you believe your superiors in the Coalition Defense Force want the peace talks to succeed?” she asked again with the sweetest voice she could muster.

“Of course they do.”

“I see. Do you think that the League will be willing to forgive the atrocities committed by the CDF during the last twenty-seven years of war?”

David fought to keep his voice neutral. He had expected some kind of ambush, but not quite this. “And what atrocities might those be, ma’am?”

For just a moment, the one-hundred-watt smile faded. “The dozens of documented incidents where CDF forces have killed League civilians, and in some cases, our own civilians in their overzealous attempts to kill League troops.”

“Do you know what the rules of engagement are in areas that have civilians in them, Ms. Sharp?” David asked, using his own version of the one-hundred-watt smile.

“I’m familiar with them, yes.”

“Then you know that to fire any type of weapon other than a battle rifle or sidearm in an engagement with civilians present, a JAG attorney must sign off on the strike,” David said, just a tad smugly.

“I fail to see what that matters, Colonel. Let’s get back to __”

“It matters that a legal representative reviews each request in real time and approves or disapproves the request,” he interrupted. “I’ve served on the front lines, ma’am. I’ve seen Marines killed from enemy fire coming from buildings with human shields in them and good men and women die because we are so against killing civilians, we wouldn’t return fire. With all due respect, the CDF does anything and everything possible to avoid innocent deaths.” Fire burned in his eyes as he looked at her.

Leslie sat just a bit taller in her chair. “Are you trying to say that the CDF has never killed a civilian, Colonel?” she asked incredulously.

“No, ma’am. I’m saying we don’t kill civilians on purpose. I’m saying we do everything we can to save

civilians. I'm also saying that when we capture League soldiers, they're interned in camps that are better living accommodations than some of our citizens have. They get three hot meals a day, which is more than the men and women serving on my ship get, and I'm sick and tired of hearing people second-guessing the tens of millions of men and women who put their lives on the line every day to defend them," David said, his voice firm with his convictions.

"Are you trying to say I don't have the right to criticize the military, Colonel?" Sharp said, her lips tight.

"You have every right to, ma'am. But try to remember that if the League won the war, you'd be among the first people they shot."

"That..." She sputtered for a moment. "And why would you say that, Colonel?"

"Because the League needs people like you to drive our morale down and question the ethics of our military. Once it wins, it doesn't need you anymore. I think we all know what happens to people who aren't needed by the League. You can ask our ancestors or you could ask the families of the nearly forty thousand dead soldiers from the initial League invasion of Canaan."

It was clear that she was shocked by the forcefulness of David's response. "I see, Colonel. Well, I think our viewers can make up their minds about your fitness to command the first peace mission with the League of Sol."

David took the barb in stride. "I'm sure they can, ma'am. After all, peace comes through strength."

"And how exactly is that, Colonel?" she asked, taking the bait.

"We all know the history of the first League attack. They decided they could overwhelm us with one massive strike. While it failed, it was close. If we had a massive military

advantage over them, they wouldn't have attacked. And with our new breed of ships and technology, that will provide strength and encourage peace."

"I guess we will find out, Colonel. Thank you for joining us tonight."

"Thank you for having me, ma'am."

As the director indicated they were off the air, Sharp stood up and stormed off without a word to David. He was left sitting in the chair for a few minutes until MacIntosh came to collect him. Standing at attention as MacIntosh strode in, he waited to see the reaction.

"Well, not quite what we expected, Colonel. Officially, I should reprimand you for getting into a political discussion on intergalactic holovision. Unofficially, jolly good show," MacIntosh said with a smile.

David gave him a small smile in return. "Thank you, sir."

"Now get back to your ship and get ready to go meet the League," MacIntosh said in his normal gruff tone.

"Aye, sir," David said, bracing to attention once more before walking off.

20

DAVID SWIPED AWAY on his tablet, seated behind the desk in the spacious interior of his office and stateroom, also known as the day cabin, onboard the *Lion of Judah*. He was reviewing CDF paperwork, one of the few constants in the universe. He smiled slightly to himself. *No matter what happens in terms of advancing technology, the one thing the military is able to keep around is forms in triplicate*. The communications line build into his desk chirped, indicating a call from the bridge. He pressed the button to answer it, speaking into the mic. "Yes?"

Sheila's voice filled the room. "Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you, but the SSI program manager assigned to our ship wishes to meet with you."

David rolled his eyes. "XO, what does he want?" he asked with more than a trace of annoyance in his voice.

"He wants to discuss preparations for launching the ship, sir."

David grimaced. "He probably wants me to authorize extended overtime on his contract," he commented dryly. He shook his head and stared at the speaker. "Send him in, XO."

"Aye, sir!"

A few minutes later, the hatch to David's office opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered man walked through, having to duck under the hatch due to his extreme height. He pulled himself up to his full height and stood in front of the desk.

"Colonel, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Kenneth Lowe and I'm the program manager from SSI assigned to the *Lion of Judah*'s shipboard systems implementation team." He placed his hands behind his back.

"Colonel David Cohen. What can I do for you, Mr. Lowe?"

Kenneth glanced down at the desk. "I wanted to discuss the disposition of your ship, sir, and work through getting her as ready as possible for when you put her into space in thirty-six hours."

As Kenneth spoke, David's face contorted into something of a scowl. He'd had many run-ins with defense contractors over the years and detested the desire of what seemed like most of them to get as much money out of the military as possible. Especially when the military was always short of funds. "Mr. Lowe, let me be clear with you. I'm not in the mood for being shaken down for additional money and I'm not even the right person to talk about it."

Kenneth's face clouded over. "Colonel, I'm not here to ask for additional funds," he began, clearly taken aback by David's assumption. "I realize that contractors have a reputation for money grubbing, but I'm here to make sure this ship does what you need it to, when you need it to do it. Given the scope of work and the time allotted, there's no way I can have you combat ready in thirty-six hours."

David nodded slowly. "I expected that. The military crew will keep working once we put her into space…I would appreciate it if your teams would be willing to transfer as much technical knowledge about the ship's systems in the time we have left."

“Gladly, sir. But I’d like to offer our continued services once you put into space.”

David’s eyebrows shot up as he began to reevaluate the lanky defense contractor. “I’m sure you’re aware I can’t guarantee the safety of civilians on this ship once we leave space dock.”

Kenneth broke into a small smile. “Oh, of course, sir. We know the score, and my team volunteered. I believe that by the time you reach your rendezvous point, we’ll have primary weapons and shields fully online and operational.”

David stood up from his desk and glanced up at Kenneth. “Perhaps I was bit hasty in my judgment of you, Kenneth.”

Kenneth extended his hand; David took it and shook warmly.

“This isn’t just a job to us, Colonel; it’s a calling. Most of my team are veterans, and regardless of the bean counters back on New Washington, we’re here to make these ships right. I hope to prove that to you.”

David smiled back at the man. “You’ve already gone a long way down that road. Tell me, just how tall are you anyway?”

Kenneth rolled his eyes. “If I had a credit for every time someone asked me that,” he said with mock annoyance. “Six feet, ten inches. It’s why I never got to serve on a ship. I did my four years on shore duty.”

“Well, I hope you and your team can get us ready. I don’t want to have to fight, but I need to be ready to fight.”

“Aye, sir. You’ll be ready. If you don’t mind, sir, I’d better get back down there.”

David stepped back behind his desk. “Carry on, Mr. Lowe.”

21

THE NEXT DAY, David found a few spare minutes to put knickknacks out in his day cabin. As the commanding officer of a warship was never off duty during situations in which combat or adverse action could be expected, he slept near the bridge rather than in his larger stateroom below decks. In decorating the cabin, it had slowly become his own over the last forty-eight hours. Mostly due to his personal effects, the room had some character to it now that belonged solely to him.

One of his favorite knickknacks was an inert hand grenade bolted to a plaque that read "Complaint Department, Please Take a Number," a small "One" hanging off the firing pin of the grenade. It had been a gift from a Marine Corps master gunnery sergeant that served under David in a past assignment. It always got looks and was a great conversation starter to first-timers to his office.

A buzzer sounded as someone rang the bell to his office.

"Come in," David said, causing the computer to open the door.

A tall, striking woman walked in. David quickly sized her up. Her skin was coal black and her uniform had the flag of the African Union in the country position; below it was the

Christian flag. She walked quickly into the room and came to attention stiffly. “Master Chief Rebecca Tinetariro reporting for duty as ordered, sir!” she announced in a rather posh British accent.

David stood up from his desk and offered a smile. “At ease, Master Chief.”

Tinetariro relaxed into a parade rest stance, and David walked around the desk, extending his hand. “Welcome aboard.”

Tinetariro looked at the hand for a moment before taking it and shaking. “Thank you, sir.”

David took notice of her vise-like grip.

He gestured to the nearest chair. “Please, have a seat,” he said before walking back around his desk. She followed suit, taking a seat in the chair with very rigid posture.

“I looked over your service jacket, Master Chief. Nearly twenty-seven years in the CDF,” David said, looking for some rapport. After all, Tinetariro’s position as Master Chief made her the senior enlisted person onboard the ship. For what they were about to do on such notice, she had to be in sync with the officers.

“Yes, sir. I enlisted the week after the attack on Canaan.”

“I see. Looking to drop two thousand pounds of freedom on our friends in the League?” David asked, a trace of a smile forming on his lips.

For the first time, Tinetariro’s face relaxed just a hair and she allowed a small smile to grace her face. “Something like that, sir.”

“I was drafted myself. Though by the time I came of age, the war had been on for ten years.”

Tinetariro studied David for a moment. “I must confess, sir; I would have never expected to see a mustang be given a command like this.”

It was something David had thought of as well. A mustang was an officer that had been enlisted prior and was generally looked down on by the rest of the officer corps, but more respected by the enlisted soldiers.

"I was surprised by it too. But God works in strange ways sometimes."

Tinetariro smiled. "That he does, Colonel." She glanced at the patches on his shoulder. "Orthodox, sir?"

David nodded. "Born and bred," he said with a smile. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say Christian for you."

Tinetariro laughed. "Methodist, sir, and I hope this ship has a good gospel choir."

David's face lit up. He had heard a gospel choir before when Sheila had dragged him to a worship session. While not a Christian, he did find himself tapping along with the beat. "I've heard an old school gospel choir before. I quite enjoyed it."

Tinetariro harrumphed. "When I finish working them into shape, I'll invite you, sir."

David returned to more serious matters. "I'm concerned that we're putting into space with an untested crew, Master Chief. I need you to ensure our enlisted personnel are ready for action in the next two days as we make our way to the rendezvous point with the League."

Tinetariro made eye contact with David. "I'll have them squared away, sir. You'll think they've been gelled for six months when I'm done." *If I was still a young corporal, the way she smiled when saying that would make my blood run cold.*

"Glad to hear it, Master Chief. I'd better get back to preparing for our final briefing by General MacIntosh."

Tinetariro stood and braced to attention. "Yes, sir. Let me know if there's anything you need from me, sir."

"Of course, Master Chief. Dismissed."

She turned smartly forward and left David's office. He sat back in his chair for a moment, hopeful that she was just what the doctor had ordered in ensuring tight discipline onboard.

After Tinetariro left, David continued to work on his briefing materials for General MacIntosh, detailing what was fully functional onboard and what remained to be completed. He was still compiling that list when his video link chimed with an inbound request from the general. He pressed the button on his tablet to initialize the link, and a moment later, General MacIntosh's face appeared on the tablet.

"Good afternoon, General."

"Good afternoon, Colonel. Ready to go?"

"Yes, sir. Not quite one hundred percent, but we'll get there."

"What's not quite one hundred percent?"

"Our weapons and shields are not fully operational at this point in time. The onboard engineering team believes that by the time we reach our destination in two days, we'll be at full operational capability."

MacIntosh furrowed his brow. "I see. Does this have anything to do with some of the contractors not disembarking as planned?"

David raised an eyebrow in surprise. *How did MacIntosh find out about that so fast*? He hadn't told anyone. "Well, sir, uh…perhaps."

MacIntosh laughed. "I have eyes in the back of my head, Colonel."

David nervously laughed to himself. "I see, sir. They volunteered."

"I heard that too. Rare breed, that lead contractor for SSI. He actually seems to care more about us than he does about squeezing the CDF for money."

"I noticed as well, sir."

“I really hope you have no need for those weapons or shielding systems, Colonel. I pray you don’t,” MacIntosh said earnestly.

“Nor do I, sir. Though hope is not a strategy, so we must be prepared for any possibility.”

“Quite right.”

“I’ve put together a briefing for you, sir, on our status.”

“I only have one question, Colonel. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then no further briefing needed. I’ll be monitoring your progress reports back to Canaan, and I urge you at all times to be as diplomatic as possible and extend all courtesies to Admiral Seville.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if there’s any possible thought in your head about sticking it to that guy because of your history with him, you’d better dig a big hole, bury that thought in it, and put a rock over it. Are we clear, son?”

“Yes, sir,” David said with clear directness in his voice. David had already come to that conclusion but having MacIntosh remind him one more time of the stakes did little to reassure him.

“I have the utmost confidence in you, Colonel. Now get out there, bring Seville and his lot back to Canaan without incident, and help us win this war without firing a shot.”

David sat just slightly taller in his chair at MacIntosh’s words. “Yes, sir!” he replied with a new determination in his voice.

“Godspeed, son. MacIntosh out.”

The picture blinked off, leaving David alone with his thoughts. While it comforted David to know that MacIntosh had confidence in his abilities out here all alone, being the man responsible for bringing Seville in safely and without causing a diplomatic incident scared David to his core. David

projected confidence; it was part and parcel for being the commanding officer of a powerful warship. But there were times, alone and lost in his thoughts, that doubts surfaced within his soul, making him question so many decisions that he had made, and the things he had to do. *Can I do this? Am I really the best person for this job?* were common thoughts David had when he let it all hang out in his mind. As he normally did when these thoughts surfaced, he said a short prayer in Hebrew, asking God to give him strength and wisdom. Focusing back on the task at hand, he resolved to take one problem at a time. As Major Pipes used to tell him, "Work the problem. Solve one issue at a time, then move on to the next one, son." The next item on the list was to get the ship launched successfully and meet the *Destruction* in two days.

The chime on David's office door rang, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Come." His voice caused the door to unlock automatically. The hatch opened, and Sheila strode into his office. David's face lit up. "Have a seat, XO."

"Not for long, I'm afraid," she said dryly, plopping down in the chair directly in front of David's desk.

"If we do well on this assignment, I think they'll let you stick around in the XO's chair,"

"I am trying to stay focused on the task at hand, rather than the possible future."

"One problem at a time."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm here," Sheila said, her tone all business.

David raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I want to be sure you're in the right state of mind for this."

"For making peace with the League?"

"For meeting the man who killed your father and to make peace with him, as well as the League."

“I’m okay, Sheila.” He invoked her name for a more personal discussion.

“David, I want to believe that, but the way you are acting shows something different. You’re putting up a great front, but I’ve known you for too long to believe the show you are putting on.”

“I’m fine, Sheila. Seriously.”

She was silent for a moment. “I’m praying for you and your ability to do this.”

“I’ll take it. Even from a gentile.” David cracked a smile.

“Hah,” Sheila replied before turning serious once again. “I don’t understand why they sent Seville. Of all the people in the League, they’ve got to send him. Why not a neutral representative?”

“They are sending a neutral representative, actually. A diplomatic minister named Carl Jenner. Intelligence suggests he’s part of a faction within the League that has been pushing for peace.”

“Interesting.”

“How are we looking in terms of final readiness?”

“In what way? All departments briefed ready at our last staff meeting.”

“I know, but… are they really ready?”

Sheila nodded her head empathically. “Yes. I’ve never seen a more motivated group of people than the set of people on this ship, from the military personnel to the civilians. They want success and they’ll do just about anything in their own power to make that success a reality.”

“I’ve seen it too, but I wanted to hear it from you to be sure.”

Sheila pointed to the clock on the wall behind David. “I think it’s about time for us to get up to the bridge and get this show on the road, sir.”

David stood and offered her a smile. “That it is.” He straightened his uniform before stepping from behind the desk. “How the heck did we end up in charge of the largest warship in the Terran Coalition?”

“Right place, right time?”

David laughed. “More like wrong place, wrong time. I thought the weight was heavy with four hundred fifty personnel and a two-hundred-and-fifty-meter destroyer to command. This is something else entirely.”

“Isn’t it the least bit fun, though?”

“Oh, it’s like nothing else I’ve ever done. I wish my father could see it. While the Cohens have long served in the military, I’m the first to make it to colonel in at least a hundred years.”

As they walked out of the hatch and into the passageway that led to the gravlift, with a bit of a smile on her face, Sheila commented dryly, “Don’t let it go to your head, Colonel, sir.”

David laughed again. “Oh, that’s what you’re around for, XO.”

They both laughed as they walked into the gravlift. “Deck One,” David said to the voice-driven computer that controlled the lift.

“Deck One acknowledged, Colonel. Identity confirmed.”

“I just realized I missed morning prayers again,” David said.

“There’s mid-morning, lunch time, and evening prayers to make up for it.”

“Very funny, XO.”

Sheila turned on a dazzling smile. “I’ve been giving you crap about how many times you have to pray a day for nearly twenty years. You didn’t expect me to stop now, did you?”

David laughed as the gravlift moved, shifting them both to the side. “I could order you to.”

Sheila snorted. “Good luck, Colonel.”

“However this turns out, Sheila, I’m glad you’re with me. I couldn’t ask for a better friend to have with me as my second in command.”

Sheila turned to look at David and smiled. “I’m glad I can be here with you.”

Two armed Marine guards stood at the apex of the passageway, and as soon as David and Sheila exited the gravlift, both of them delivered crisp salutes, which were returned smartly by David and Sheila. He paused and extended his arm, gesturing to the hatch to the bridge. “Ladies first.”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “Going to hold the door for me too?”

“I know better than that.”

They both pulled their covers on as they walked into the bridge of the *Lion of Judah* together. As they did, Master Chief Tinetariro piped up, “Colonel on deck!”

Ruth, Hampton, and Taylor were already at their assigned bridge stations, awaiting the launch. The enlisted personnel stood and braced to attention along with the standing officers. Sheila stiffened as well, saluting David.

David’s hand came up to his brow in the practiced motion of a salute. He looked around the bridge of the ship—his ship—manned and ready for the first time. After a moment, he finished the salute and announced, “As you were.” Immediately, the crew went back to their assigned stations.

David glanced back at Sheila. “After you, XO.”

Sheila smiled and took her station. David followed after a moment and took his seat in the CO’s chair. David looked forward to Hammond and Ruth, who sat directly in front of the CO and XO at their respective stations. “Navigation, what is our launch readiness?”

“Sir, our reactor is powered up and operating normally. We are standing by to release moorings and umbilicals from the shipyard,” Hammond said.

“Conn, TAO. Ship defensive systems and weapons are ready—at least the weapons currently functional—and all weapons magazines are full,” Ruth added.

“So aside from a lack of fighters, we’re settled. And let’s hope our contractors can get our remaining weapon systems functional in short order,” David said as he looked forward.

David glanced down at his command seat and punched up the code for MC1. The tone for it swept the ship, and he spoke down toward the microphone built into his seat. “Attention, all hands, this is your commanding officer. We are about to launch on the most important mission that any of us have ever attempted. That mission is to escort the League back to Canaan, so that peace talks may commence.” David paused for a moment. “This is a day I doubt many of us thought would come. I know that I can count on all of you over the next several days to give one hundred and fifty percent effort as we continue to make repairs and gain control over our systems.”

David paused for a moment. “Very well. All hands, man this ship, and bring it to life!” he said, invoking the formal words to launch a ship.

“Navigation, release all moorings and umbilicals,” David stated, looking back to the front of the bridge.

“Aye, sir, releasing,” Hammond stated.

It took a few minutes for the thick tubes connecting the ship to the drydock to detach from the *Lion*’s hull. The airlock also detached and retracted, and dozens of small shuttles pulled back.

“Conn, Navigation. We’re now free of all moorings and umbilicals, sir,” Hammond said.

“Navigation, all ahead, dead slow until we clear the drydock.”

“Aye aye, sir, bringing main drives online.”

The *Lion* slowly began to move forward, and David could feel the G forces pressing him back into his seat, fighting the dampener fields that protected the crew from sudden acceleration and deceleration forces. Creeping at first, but gaining momentum, the shipyard faded from the forward view screen, leaving open space in its wake.

Taylor cleared his throat. “Conn, communications, receiving a message from CDF command. ‘Good luck, Godspeed, and be careful.’”

“Communications, acknowledge the message. Navigation, there are a set of rendezvous coordinates pre-loaded in. Please set our Lawrence drive to them.”

“Conn, navigation. Coordinates set. Lawrence drive at maximum power.”

Fighting down a wave of adrenaline, David leaned forward. “Navigation, open the hole, all ahead full.”

A massive artificial wormhole opened in front of the *Lion of Judah*; a construct of the Lawrence drive. The *Lion*’s sub-light ion engines flared at maximum thrust, and the ship flew straight into the center of the swirling mouth of the wormhole. In a moment, she disappeared and the wormhole closed behind her.

22

AFTER THE TRANSIT through the wormhole, it took several hours to fully recharge the massive Lawrence drive within safe parameters in order to avoid stressing the drive. Taking advantage of the downtime, David decided to go to the synagogue, also known as a shul to Orthodox Jews, onboard the *Lion*. The *Lion* held four different chapels: one dedicated as a synagogue, one as a Christian church used by all dominations, one as a mosque, and the last was used by other faiths, including a small group of secular humanists that met once a week to discuss the happenings of life and how they interacted with the universe. David had been remiss in visiting the synagogue since he had come onboard, and had conducted the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers in his office or quarters. But he longed to spend a few minutes around other believers, reciting the prayers of the Talmud and so he decided to simply make the time to join them. As he walked into the synagogue, he took his *tallit gadol*, or prayer shawl, out of the bag. A simple cloth carrying bag, it was embroidered with his name in Hebrew and was a gift from his mother dating back to his bar mitzvah.

David put the shawl over his head and took a seat in the back, not wanting to draw attention to himself as the commanding officer of the ship. Notwithstanding this, an older man immediately made his way to David and sat down next to him. “Allow me to introduce myself, Colonel. Rabbi Erez Kravitz.”

David looked over the man; he was somewhat squat and appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties. Kravitz looked the part of a rabbi. He wore a prayer shawl as well, and under it, he had on a CDF duty uniform. David could make out from his rank insignia that he was a lieutenant colonel in the chaplain corps.

“Pleased to meet you, Rabbi. I’m David Cohen,” he said softly, not wishing to introduce his position or disrupt the other people praying.

“Ah yes, the commander of our vessel,” Kravitz said with a twinkle in his eye.

“I’m just here as a Jew, Rabbi,” David said, again trying to deflect any attention.

“Come now, Colonel. You are too modest.”

“Just trying to live what I believe, Rabbi.”

“Are you Orthodox?” Kravitz asked, a touch of surprise in his voice.

“My parents were both Orthodox, and I am as well. I’ve had to make some compromises to CDF regulations. I think you’d find I line up pretty well with the Modern Orthodox movement,” David explained.

Kravitz looked at him intently. “What compromises might those be, Colonel?”

David fought to keep a grimace from crossing his face. He did not want to get into a religious debate with the rabbi onboard his ship, and nearly any time he attempted to explain his motivations, it caused a debate. “As I am sure you know, Rabbi, while there are broad allowances for

religious exemptions for conscripted soldiers, a career officer such as myself must maintain CDF personal appearance and grooming regulations. As well, I am often unable to observe Shabbat, and many other of our holidays."

Kravitz nodded thoughtfully. "I would be curious as to your reasoning for this position, Colonel."

David flipped a mental coin and decided to explain his reasoning to the rabbi; after all, he thought to himself that it would be nice to have a friendly relationship with the only rabbi within a few million miles. "I apply the principle of *Pikuach Nefesh* to my service in the CDF," he said, referencing the principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious consideration. "Given that we are at war, and my calling appears to be that of a solider, I must discharge my duties to the best of my ability."

"I understand. I know that must be a difficult road to follow, but I commend you for your efforts to remain true to HaShem."

Inwardly, David breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Rabbi."

Kravitz patted David's arm. "Please, come back as often as you can. I think where we are going, we're going to need as much help from HaShem as He can possibly give us."

David nodded. "I agree, Rabbi. Wherever our mission will take us, we cannot succeed without His help."

Kravitz nodded and stood up, walking back to the front of the synagogue. David bowed his head for the next ten minutes and recited prayers from the Talmud before interjecting a plea to God. In Hebrew, he said, "Adonai, please bless this mission. If it is your will, please let there be peace, even with these vile and evil people. Too many have died, and I have so much blood on my hands. If it is not to

be, please spare the lives of my crew and let them return safely home to their families."

David raised his head after finishing his prayer. He never asked God, spoken as HaShem in conversation or Adonai in prayer, to allow him victory. He asked only that the lives of those under his command be saved, for he felt it was to embrace vanity to ask for victory. Standing and walking to the back of the room, he removed his prayer shawl and returned it to the bag his mother had given him. Exiting the synagogue and returning to his duties, he felt refreshed for the first time in several days.

"It's good to see you back in this role, Antonov," Pierre Seville, fleet admiral and overall commander of the League of Sol military expedition to claim the territories of the Terran Coalition, said as he shook the glass of brandy he held. His flagship, the League Starship *Destruction,* was on its way to meet up with the new CDF ship; the *Lion of Judah*. *What an... odd name for a warship. No doubt based on a religious superstition.*

Zehnya Antonov, the captain of his flagship, took a drink from his own glass, as he peered intently at Seville. "I'm glad to be here, Admiral. You plucking me from retirement was, well... it was the answer to an old man's wish."

"Farming carrots and goats not doing it for you?"

"No, Admiral. I felt useless. Discarded."

"Same as I did, during my rehabilitation."

"How'd you get out of it?"

"Much the same as you," Seville said, his mouth curled up in a smile. "I had a benefactor that saw my potential."

"You are too kind."

“Nonsense. The League needs good officers.” *And above all, I need loyal followers*. “It’s a matter of matching the right people to the right positions.”

“I live to serve,” Antonov said as he finished his brandy.

“Your family, how are they?”

“Far better now that my wife doesn’t have to crawl on her hands and knees for root vegetables for us to eat.”

Seville’s face turned red. “An outrage.”

“Sir?” Antonov said, the unmistakable tenor of fear entering his voice.

“What our political commissar overlords do to cover their own ineptitude.” At the look of outright terror that crossed Antonov’s face, Seville only grinned. “Captain, do you really think I don’t have my quarters swept daily for surveillance systems? There’s nothing to fear here.”

“How do you do it, sir?” he asked very quietly.

“Simple. I watched how they play each other, and then copied it. I obtained leverage over the political officer—Colonel Strappi—that was assigned to my first ship after my rehabilitation. I allow him to think he has some level of power. I remind him when he oversteps that I could ruin him in an instant and cause him and his entire family to be put to death. He is weak. I am strong. It is the way of things. I’ve even ensured that relatives of his received plum postings they couldn’t otherwise qualify for. It pains me to say it, but he’s quite a sentimentalist, for a morale officer, that is.”

“Regardless, Admiral, I am in your debt.”

“Tell me; what of the crew? What do they really think about our mission?”

“Some desire peace. Some hate the Terrans as much as they hate us. Some don’t care and simply do their jobs,” Antonov said, shrugging his shoulders.

“And you?”

“It would be nice to see an end to this war, Admiral. I’ve seen so many young ones under my command die in service of the state. It would be refreshing to see them grow old and have families of their own.”

Seville poured another glass of brandy for each of them. “You may count me among those that hate the Terran Coalition,” he said, briefly touching a hand to his right eye. “They took my eye. More accurately, a single Terran who longed to die as a martyr took it from me. His son is coming to meet us.”

“I didn’t realize, Admiral.”

“Or did he?” Seville mused. “If Colonel Lemieux had an IQ higher than fifty, we would have defeated the Terrans twenty-seven years ago. I wouldn’t have lost my eye.” Rage built within, expressing itself as his face turned blood red. “The hundreds of thousands of League sailors that died would’ve lived.”

Antonov sat mute, the look of fear back.

“It was not to be, Captain. Instead, I took the fall and spent fifteen hard years planting crops in the semi-arid dirt. It might have been enough to break most men, but not me. I was even more motivated to destroy the Terrans when I returned to the fleet.”

“Of course, sir,” Antonov finally said.

Seville let his facial expression go slack. “I also live but to serve the League. If the Social and Public Safety Committee want peace, then I will gladly carry their ambassador and do everything in my power to achieve it. In my heart, I may want to kill every last one of them, but I will do my duty. We can do nothing less as members of the League.”

“At least we’ve survived this long, Admiral.”

“Yes… yes, we have. It’s growing late. We’ve an eventful day in front of us tomorrow.”

Antonov seemingly got the hint instantly and stood. “Thank you again, Admiral.”

“Do your duty, do it well, Captain. Make me proud. Dismissed.”

23

David climbed up the last rung on the ladder to the central space traffic control area in the massive fighter bay of the *Lion*. He found himself next to the station where the "Air Boss" sat, along with her assistant, the "Mini-Boss." Titles that carried over from generations of naval aircraft carriers were at home on the *Lion*. David watched dozens of fighters and bombers from the CSV *Pat Tillman* land in the bay, taxiing to assigned parking stations. An hour or so earlier, the *Pat Tillman* had jumped into the transfer point and started ferrying over its entire combat capable fighter wing. The *Pat Tillman* was an American-designed Wade McClusky class light carrier, carrying roughly eighty combat spacecraft. Like most other carriers in the CDF fleet, Wade McClusky class carriers possessed little in the way of anti-ship weaponry and formed the nexus of a Carrier Space Battle Group (CVSBG).

David had been curious to know who Pat Tillman was; the Americans named most of their ships after famous people. David was surprised to find out that Patrick Daniel Tillman was a professional football player from Earth who was killed in combat during the early 21st century. After spending a few minutes reading his biography, it was clear to David that the

Americans revered Tillman because he volunteered to join the military after achieving every possible success in life. He had insulated himself and his family from any want or need, yet he'd still answered the call to serve.

He continued to reflect on that as the fighters continued to touch down; after all, in the Terran Coalition, regardless of nation-state and with only a few exceptions, every eighteen-year-old male or female was drafted into either the military of their nation-state or the CDF. Men were drafted for four years; women were drafted for three. The compromise in mandating women to serve a shorter period than men had been key to gaining passage of the Universal Draft Act in the early years following the appearance of the League of Sol. The idea of a society where only a few made the choice to serve struck David as a foreign concept.

As the final fighter came to a halt, David took his leave of the flight control crew, walking out of the control room and down a stairway to the flight deck. As he did, the memory of his first meeting with Amir leapt into his mind.

Back in the early days of his assignment to the CSV *Audacious*, which housed just over forty starfighters of various types, David had to clean up a number of personnel problems. The ship had morale issues that the CDF had decided to remedy by changing out most of the senior leadership. As a result, he arrived at a time of flux.

A couple of weeks after his assignment and in the middle of trying to retool the ship's crew, he met one of the fighter squadron commanders during an informal dinner in the officer's mess. That particular pilot was notably short even compared to the typical fighter jock. Space inside a cockpit was at a premium, which made excessive height a problem. The man sitting down across from him had no reason to worry.

"Greetings, Major Cohen."

David glanced at the pilot's uniform, taking in his rank and name—Captain Hassan Amir. He also had his space combat wings, had served for at least fifteen years, and came from the planet of New Arabia. There was a patch under the Terran Coalition and country flag position that bore the Crescent and Star, the symbol for Islam.

"Peace be unto you, Captain Amir," David said, recalling a traditional Arabic greeting learned from social studies class so many years ago.

"*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*," Amir replied, the Arabic phrase for "And unto you peace," which was the traditional answer. "I am the squadron commander for the 237th fighter squadron."

"Ah yes, you guys style yourselves as 'The Black Knights,' right?" David asked with a smile.

"Yes, sir. I wanted to talk to you about some issues with the pilots, sir."

David raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you be going through the air wing commander, Captain?"

"Well, sir, he informed us today he's been relieved of duty and will be departing the ship tomorrow morning. As of now, we do not know who the replacement is."

"I see. In that case, what can I do for you?"

"To be blunt, sir, our squadrons don't get enough training. The ship's budget never seems to have room for live fire training exercises, and our pilots aren't as good as they ought to be as a result."

"Which leads to increased casualties."

"Exactly, sir. I was hoping that as our new executive officer, you could help."

One of David's duties as the XO was to allocate the budget for the ship. Now it made sense why Amir would seek him out. "Let me dig into it, Captain. I can't make promises, but

I'll do everything in my power to get the pilots the training they need."

Amir nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"New Arabia?" David asked, inclining his head toward Amir's country patch.

"Yes, sir. Palestine territory."

When the great diaspora migration had occurred, many of the different former countries and nationalist groups that made up the initial landing at Canaan set out for the local stars and founded their own planetary colonies. The Jews had done that with New Israel, and many groups of Arabs had come together under the banner of New Arabia.

"New Israel myself," David replied, attempting to strike up a rapport with Amir.

"I have to confess, I don't know why when my ancestors had their pick of planets, we ended up on one that is mostly desert," Amir deadpanned.

David laughed. "We did the same thing. New Israel is a pretty tough landscape. We've terraformed it quite a bit, but still. It's not Canaan, New America, or the British colonies," he said, referencing the major nation-states of New America and New Great Britain. Between them and the planets that made up the British Commonwealth, they accounted for sixty percent of the Terran Coalition's population and industrial output.

"I guess tradition does not die easily."

David nodded his agreement. "No, it doesn't. It's kind of amazing how all the countries from Earth fanned out. Israel, America, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Great Britain, Australia, even Canada. They all have their own planets now." David took a sip of water. "So how'd you end up in Space Combat Command?"

"I've always wanted to be a pilot… ever since I was a little boy," Amir said. "When it came time to be drafted, I instead

applied for and was accepted to the flight academy. Fifteen years later, here I am. My wife is a pilot and my oldest daughter wants to be one as well." He beamed with pride.

"The family that pilots together, stays together?"

Amir laughed. "Very true, Major."

"It's David when we're not on duty."

Amir extended his hand to David. "Good to meet you, David. Likewise, I am Hassan when not on duty."

David shook the outstretched hand warmly. "Good to meet you too, Hassan."

DAVID SMILED as the memory faded and Amir's fighter set down on the flight deck. The canopy popped open, and Hassan Amir slowly climbed down from the fighter. Seeing David, he promptly saluted him. David's hand snapped up to his brow to return the salute crisply. Amir removed the helmet to his flight suit, hanging it off his utility belt. "Permission to come aboard, Colonel Cohen?"

David grinned at his old friend. "Granted, Colonel Amir."

Amir returned it. "I am happy we are able to serve again. I must confess I was very happy to hear of your promotion. I cannot help but wonder where the will of Allah will take you."

David knew that Amir was a very devout Muslim; he was the Muslim equivalent of an Orthodox Jew. At one time, he knew from reading books on history that Jews and Muslims didn't have the best relations, but now in the 25th century, that had been left in the past. The two men might not agree on every piece of their religious belief, but they respected each other and were good friends.

"I wonder, too, where God will lead. But for now, we've got our orders. Tell me, how much of the wing did you bring

over?" David asked.

"Three squadrons of fighters, though one is at half strength, and one squadron of bombers. That's all the *Tillman* had left after our last series of engagements."

"Well, that's the joy of having to patch this all together. As it is, we don't have enough stores to support a full sixteen squadrons anyway. I'm hopeful we won't need your services," David said, looking around the bay.

"So command is sending us out for this…" Amir cleared his throat. "Peace mission?" He asked the words as if they were distasteful. "Do they expect the League to actually offer us an acceptable deal?"

David shook his head. "There are no details yet as to what they're offering. We're heading out to bring them in as quietly as possible."

"I'd like to request permission to have CSP setup during the rendezvous." Amir referenced Combat Space Patrols, a flight of two to four fighters providing close range support to the carrier in case of sudden attack.

"We can put a few fighters on ready five, but I'm under strict orders not to provoke the League in any way. We are to remain passive unless attacked." David softened his expression. "I know this is a lot to process, Amir, but we need this to work. You know it as well as I do."

"I'm not eager to make peace with liars, murders, and cowards, David," Amir said harshly.

"Nor am I, but I'd rather make peace with them now than continue to send generations of our people off to fight and die if there's a way to make it stop with honor."

"Perhaps you're right."

"How is Nasir?" David inquired of Amir's oldest son.

Amir flashed a smile. "He is well, as is Natara," he said of his daughter. "She has done especially well and recently transferred to a flight squadron on the carrier *Illustrious*."

“That’s great news, Amir. And Fatima?”

Amir let out a laugh. “She’s good… has a job teaching civilian pilots now. Makes three times what I do too.”

“You know, you’ve done your duty, old friend. Maybe you should think about joining her, instead of flying into death’s door on a daily basis.”

“It is my calling from Allah.”

“Well, in that case, I’m glad you are following that calling on my ship,” David said. “Now let’s get your pilots settled and I’ll give you the nickel tour of this rather impressive ship.”

Sheila walked around the officer’s mess, searching for an empty table, or at least one with few people at it. The last forty-eight hours had been grueling for everyone on the ship, and she was simply exhausted from giving orders, examining problems, and trying to resolve them. Finally, finding an empty two-person side table, she sat her tray of food as she took a seat and arranged her silverware.

She lowered her head to pray. “God, thank you for the food I am about to receive. for the good health I enjoy, and thank you for those who I serve with. Please bless the peace talks before us and allow us to be Your means to bring peace to the Terran Coalition and our citizens. Amen.” When she raised her head, Sheila saw the smiling face of Major Elizabeth Merriweather staring at her.

“Major, may I join you? There aren’t any other open seats,” Merriweather asked.

Suppressing a desire to groan, as she just wanted a few minutes of peace, Sheila instead put up a smile. “Of course, Major. Please sit. I’d be happy to share some food with you.”

Sliding into the other chair and putting her food down, Merriweather too bowed her head silently for a moment. “Thank you, Major Thompson.”

“Please, it’s Sheila.”

“Elizabeth. Glad to meet you less formally,” Merriweather said with a smile.

“I don’t recall seeing an officer serving as program manager to a civilian before,” Sheila began, curious about Merriweather’s position. “How’d you end up working with Dr. Hayworth? I thought that kind of job was reserved for civilians and contractors.”

Merriweather laughed. “Oh, I placed in the ninety-ninth percentile of the CVAB. After that, I was offered a full scholarship to the engineering school of my choice. I ended up in advanced composite research, which led to working with Dr. Hayworth to create a new composite substance capable of handling the stress of anti-matter reaction.”

Sheila blinked a few times. “Wow. I thought I was doing good at the seventy-fifth percentile. How long have you been working with Dr. Hayworth?”

“Going on five years now.”

“You’ve put up with that guy for five years? You must have the patience of a saint.”

“Or Job, perhaps,” Merriweather said as a joke. “He’s not bad once you get to know him.”

Sheila openly stared at Merriweather with a skeptical look. “Seriously? That man crawls under my skin.”

“Oh, I think he enjoys trying to get into everyone’s head and make them mad. There’s a heart of gold in there. It’s just hidden beneath layers of armor.”

“He doesn’t make fun of your religion?”

“There was a time he did, but after setting some firm boundaries, he backed off. Dr. Hayworth’s atheism is based in his intellect. He doesn’t believe there’s a scientific

argument for God. I think after his wife died, he really hardened his positions. I do know he adored her. I doubt he's ever really gotten over her death, and the few times we've discussed it, the fact that she was religious and that all her family and friends prayed for a miracle that never came…" Merriweather's voice trailed off.

"I think that makes us all wonder sometimes. Why is one saved and not another?"

"Sometimes you just have to accept it on faith and keep going. Still, I enjoy working with him regardless of his temperamental personality. He's easily the single most intelligent person I've ever met."

"You sound as if you feel bad for him."

Merriweather furrowed her brow. "Don't you?"

"I suppose, on some level, but he's such a jerk. Kind of hard to feel sorry for that."

"He's not always a jerk. Sometimes he's one of the most considerate people I know. But even if he was…love those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you."

"Fellow Christian?" Sheila asked. Neither she nor Merriweather had a religious emblem on their respective uniforms.

"Methodist, born and bred. With a Jewish father."

"That sounds complicated."

"Best of both worlds. Christmas and Hanukkah!"

Sheila laughed. "I see you will get along with the rest of us just fine."

Merriweather smiled in return. "I look at it like this… if I show even in an imperfect way what I believe and how it changes my life to Dr. Hayworth, maybe it will cause him to question where he is, and perhaps God will be able to speak to him again. Someday, maybe he can find his way back to

his faith. Getting through to him any other way is impossible. All I can do is try to show him."

"Show, not tell….as Colonel Cohen would say."

"Exactly." Merriweather smiled again, glancing down at her food. "We'd better eat up. I've got at least five more hours of reactor diagnostics before we perform our final jump."

"Five hours? Don't you have computers to run automatic diagnostics?"

"Well, we do. But Dr. Hayworth doesn't trust them yet, because the machine learning algorithm hasn't been fully trained yet."

"Trained?" Sheila asked.

"Yeah, because of the limitations on wide-ranging artificial intelligence, we have to create narrowly tailored AIs that can only do one task and have specific inhibitors to prevent them from evolving."

"I never quite understood all of that."

Merriweather shook her head. "I kind of get it, working with some of the advanced AIs we have access to. Even the scaled down version is scary in a way."

"Why?"

"Let's say you have an AI that has one mission, for instance, optimize production of a type of ore. It if determined that human beings had the type of metal it was trying to get more of in our bodies… it could decide to kill us all to process our bodies for the substance."

"I'd never thought of it like that. That's pretty freaky," Sheila said, quirking her nose at the thought. "You get to work on some interesting stuff."

"That I do."

"Have you been to the chapel onboard yet?"

"Not yet," Merriweather said. "I'm going to try to this Sunday."

“I like the chaplain. I’ll send you an invite to the service I go to.”

“Okay, I’d love that.”

“Great.” Sheila bit into her cheeseburger with gusto, glad she’d taken the time to meet a new friend.

Several hours later, David walked into the bridge of the *Lion*; it was as busy as ever. The senior staff was at their stations, and Sheila was perched in the CO’s seat as she currently held the conn. Master Chief Tinetariro announced David’s presence loudly. “Colonel on the bridge!”

“As you were,” David said quickly as the few crewmen and officers not strapped into their stations came to attention. “XO, I have the conn.”

Sheila stood and moved over to the XOs chair. “Aye aye, sir. Colonel Cohen has the conn.”

David took the seat and pulled up his command status screen. “One jump remaining, XO. Are we ready?”

“Yes, sir. The contractors have managed to get all our weapons online, along with our defensive systems. We’re not ready for deployment, but as far as the current mission, we’re good to go and at one hundred percent effectiveness.”

David broke into a grin. “Well, I’ll be. I think Hanson owes me lunch because he bet me the contractors couldn’t get it done in time, and I said they could.”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “Sir, we don’t pay for lunch onboard.”

“Point taken. Maybe I’ll tell him to get us invited to the chief’s mess.” The officers always wanted to be invited to the chief’s mess, as it had the best food on the ship. Looking toward Hammond, he said, “Navigation, what is our jump capability status?”

“Sir, engineering is currently checking our Lawrence drive for any problems before we make the final jump, just in case we have to jump back out quickly,” Hammond said.

“Very well. TAO, tactical systems status?”

“Sir, all tactical systems are running normally. Hoping we don’t need them, sir.”

David allowed his smile to grow just a bit. Sheila interjected at that point, “We have a squadron of fighters on ready five alert status as well, sir.”

“What about our Marines?” David asked.

“Colonel Demood has them ready to go, sir. I don’t see the League trying to board us, though,” Sheila replied.

“Stranger things have happened, XO.”

“Conn, navigation. Lawrence drive is fully charged and ready for our final jump. Coordinates have been confirmed.”

David looked at Sheila as if to say, *No backing out.* Turning forward to the tactical and navigation stations, he commanded, “Navigation, commence jump.”

Hammond inputted the proper commands into her console. “Aye aye, sir. Jumping now, sir.”

It took a few moments for the massive Lawrence drive generators in the stern of the ship to generate and open a stable wormhole between the *Lion*’s current position in space and where it needed to go. David marveled at the science and theory behind the Lawrence drive. It was astounding to him that they could go the incredible distances in the blink of an eye. As the ship accelerated its sub-light engines, the *Lion* flew into the maw of the wormhole and exited out the other side several seconds later. There was a slight delay before the sensors would snap back on; those few moments could be very dangerous if a trap was waiting.

God help us if Seville’s waiting with a fleet to destroy our newest ship. David gripped the hand rests of his chair, waiting for the LIDAR systems to come online.

“Conn, TAO. Two contacts detected. One Behemoth class League dreadnought, designated Master One. One Type-D League transport, designated Master Two.”

David’s gaze stayed forward. “TAO, scan Master One. Are its weapons and defensive systems charged?” he asked.

Come on, Goldberg.

“Conn, TAO. Master One’s weapons are offline, and it’s running with shields and point defense fields deactivated. They’re scanning us as well.”

David let out an audible sigh. “So far, so good. They wanted to talk peace, let’s talk peace. Communications, open a channel to the *Destruction*.”

After what seemed like an eternity in which the bridge crew waited on pins and needles, Taylor spoke. “Conn, communications, we’re receiving an audio/visual signal, sir.”

David drew himself up as tall as he could sit in his chair. “Communications, put them on my personal viewer.”

The view above David’s chair came to the life with the signal from the *Destruction*. It centered around a single man who wore the gray utilitarian uniform of the League of Sol. His rank insignia identified him as a Fleet Admiral, a flag officer who had four stars. The man had a slight smirk on his face that hinted at amusement. “Greetings, Coalition vessel,” he stated. “I am Admiral Pierre Seville, commanding the overall League of Sol military presence on this side of our frontier.” He continued, “You are our escort, I presume, on this mission of peace to your nation?”

David put on his absolute best poker face. “This is Colonel David Cohen, commanding the CSV *Lion of Judah*. We have been sent to escort you to Canaan.”

“I see. I suppose my superiors aren’t the only ones guilty of not considering the best-named ship to send on a peace negotiation. Nevertheless, we are ready to begin our journey.

We have a gesture we make first, however, Colonel. Diplomatic Minister Jenner wishes for us to immediately transfer custody of one of our prisoners of war, a Captain Adriana Barrigo," Seville replied.

David couldn't quite place Seville's attitude. It seemed to him that Seville was darkly amused by the entire situation. Adriana Barrigo had been a POW for at least ten years, he recalled. She was the daughter of a previous Terran Coalition president; at the time, it was a major blow to morale within the Terran Coalition. He seemed to remember it had been whispered that she had been offered early release but had refused, as was the code of all POWs. He decided to take a gamble on creating rapport with the League Admiral. "I will have a crew standing by to receive your shuttle, Admiral." He paused for a moment. "Would you, Minister Jenner, and your officers be interested in having dinner aboard the *Lion* during our voyage to Canaan?" David asked.

Sheila looked at David in shock as the words left his mouth. "Why, Colonel, that is a splendid idea," Seville said with a smile. "We could meet tomorrow before our final wormhole jump to Canaan?"

"I think that would be fine, Admiral." Thinking over protocol, he realized that since there was a band onboard, they'd have to play both national anthems. *What have I gotten us into?*

"Very well. I look forward to meeting you face to face at that time, Colonel. In the meantime, we will transfer Captain Barrigo to you by shuttle before we jump to the next set of coordinates," Seville said, nodding to someone off screen. His image then disappeared and the screen went black.

"Sir?" Sheila openly stared at David. "Are we really having them over for dinner?" she asked, eyes wide with amazement. "I realize we want to help the process along, but…are you sure?"

“It’s the right call, XO,” he said.

“But that’s not just any old League admiral, that’s Admiral Seville!” she continued. “He…”

“Killed my father,” David finished for her, looking directly into her eyes. “I know that. As you were, Major.”

By David’s tone and words, Sheila knew she had crossed a line on the bridge she shouldn’t have.

“Yes, sir,” she said in a more subdued tone to try to make up for it. There was silence on the bridge after the interaction; no one acted like they heard, which was proper. David looked forward, putting it out of his mind and concentrating on what would need to be done to welcome the League VIPs.

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As the communication screen snapped off, Admiral Pierre Seville sat back in his flag chair. The ship technically had a commanding officer that doubled as Seville's fleet captain, but Seville was going to be on the bridge and in command for this endeavor. Savoring the interaction with the *Lion*'s commander, Seville enjoyed playing the game; in fact, he lived for playing it. He had been the leader of the League's initial attack on Canaan; and after he finished serving his time in forced early retirement, he'd been rehabilitated and given the leave to ask for an assignment. Without hesitation, Seville had asked to take over the League military operations against the Terran Coalition.

Seville reflected on the fact that the Terran Coalition had survived for nearly thirty years in a war against the League; mostly due to the fact the League couldn't bring its overwhelming superiority in numbers to bear because it had to police its internal holdings. The Terran Coalition's citizens would tell you that God was on their side, but Seville thought them a bunch of children that feared the monster under the bed. The truth was, if the League ever summoned the balance of its fleet against the Coalition, their military would wilt and die.

The League wouldn't bring its fleet to bear because everything in the League had to go through fifteen committees before any decision could be made. *Ah, socialism,* Seville thought to himself, *such a noble experiment, but a failure as a government leadership model.* Someday, Seville would fix that. He previously had plans that once the Terran Coalition was defeated, and he was hailed as the hero of the League, he would use that power to overthrow the old men of the Social and Public Safety Committee and create a new League based on authoritarian power. But that now would have to wait.

"Admiral, I am not sure of this. Exposing our officers to direct contact with these capitalists and religious zealots…" Colonel Strappi, the political officer and overall morale commissar for the *Destruction*, said, breaking Seville's train of thought.

Seville suppressed the urge to slap Strappi. He hated political officers with a passion, but he tolerated Strappi for one reason; the man could be reasoned with and lacked enough connections to truly hurt Seville. "Do you truly have no faith in the loyalty of my staff, Colonel?" Seville asked in an acrobatically mocking tone. "Do not worry. There is no harm in having a dinner before we get to Canaan. Are you not the least bit interested in what these Terrans are like?"

Strappi would not be deterred. "But if your people are not loyal…"

Seville cleared his throat. "They are completely loyal, Colonel. Do not concern yourself with it," Seville said with a commanding voice. He was immediately amused by how Strappi acted like a cur dog and backed down even with his body language.

"Of course, Admiral."

"Now I suggest that you remember your manners and tact, as you will be joining us for this dinner."

“What of the prisoner, sir? I am unsure of the minister’s order to let her go so soon. The things she might say…”

Seville again suppressed the desire to backhand Strappi. “I will be fine, Colonel,” Seville grated. “Everything is going as we expected.”

Taking the hint, Strappi excused himself and walked away. Seville looked over his bridge, thinking about how much he looked forward to meeting the son of the man who took sight from one of his eyes and defeated an armada. That would make the entire trip worth it.

THE MEDICAL BAY of the *Lion of Judah*, referred to interchangeably by the crew as medbay, sickbay, or the doc shack, was massive compared to those on other ships David had served on. He remembered that the technical specifications said it could handle two hundred acute cases at once and even more sub-acute injuries. The ship had several doctors, and many nurses and nurse assistants. Today though, there was only one person as a patient in the medical bay: Captain Adriana Barrigo. She sat on the edge of a high-tech hospital bed with various sensors and scanners poring over her vital signs.

David stood behind Dr. Tural and asked quietly, “What’s her condition, Doctor?”

“She’s at the peak of health physically. Well fed, constant exercise, and no signs of injury recently,” Tural muttered.

“Recently?”

“There are older injuries here and there, but the newest is between eighteen and twenty-four months old.”

“What about mental health?”

“That’s not my field, Colonel. But professionally speaking, I’ve worked with many liberated POWs and service

members that have PTSD. I believe she's disturbed in some way. That's natural in this situation, and I'd like to establish a rapport with her as a physician first before exploring any mental issues."

David nodded. "I understand, Doctor. I would like to know what they've done with her and the others, though. We haven't seen a POW released by the League in nearly eleven years."

Tural furrowed his brow. "Why, sir? They will all be home soon enough, Colonel. I don't think that dredging up trauma from the last ten years will help."

"I need to understand what we're dealing with from the League, Doctor. We all need to know if there's anything else going on here."

Tural frowned. "Colonel, please be gentle with her," he said, gesturing for David to proceed.

David walked over to her bedside; as she was in uniform, she jumped off the bed and came to attention.

"As you were, Captain," David said with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, sir." Barrigo made eye contact with David after a fashion. It wasn't so much she was looking at David; she was more so looking through him. "I... I'm happy to be going home, sir."

"I can't imagine what you've been through, Captain. But I must ask, what was it like, especially recently?"

Tural frowned and looked toward David, starting to open his mouth to protest the question. Before he could form the words though, Barrigo spoke. "It wasn't easy. The League has had the attitude of 'adapting' us to life as League citizens. We get settled in prisoner colonies and are made to study League history and society. We weren't mistreated recently, at least, not badly. There were incidents sometimes, especially if we resisted them."

“Resist them how?” Tural asked.

“Refusing to recite the League oath of allegiance. Questioning their government’s decrees and decisions. Showing overt and public religious devotions. Really, anything that strikes the morale officers as being rebellious against what they call the Authority of Society.” Barrigo shrugged. “You get put into prolonged isolation, restricted diets. If they’re really mad at you, they send you to the pit… to sensory deprivation tanks and environmental alteration chambers. At least…they did.”

David frowned, but felt he needed to press on. “So what do they do now?”

“Nothing.” Barrigo breathed in for a moment. “About sixteen months ago, the League had a change of leadership internally. Nothing too public, the same people are in power as before, but the balance of power inside the government shifted away from the League’s Social and Public Safety Committee to the League Defense Council, that is, the military and security services. I don’t know why; our guards and caretakers tend to be tight-lipped about that part. All I know for sure is that the League’s defense establishments are getting tired of the war and how the politicians were running it.”

That comment brought curious looks from both David and Tural. “So this peace offer is… genuine?” David asked.

“Yes, very much so. The League is desperate for peace. Even with all their secrecy toward us, our sources in the prison colony have talked about tax riots all the way back to Earth itself. Alien races along their far frontiers are starting to exploit their need to keep ships facing us. If the League doesn’t make peace with us soon…. I think it’ll be torn apart.”

David nodded and prepared to leave. “Thank you, Captain, for clearing things up a bit. I’ll leave you to recover with the

doctor."

Tural walked with David into another section of the medical bay. "There's no way she just knows all that from interaction with the guards," David said to Tural, his tone blunt and direct.

"I would have to agree with you, sir," Tural replied. "But why plant that information in her? They have to know we won't trust it."

David shook his head. "I'm not sure, Doctor. I find it interesting that she allowed them to release her ahead of the longest serving POW." At Tural's quizzical look, he said, "There's a code of honor among all POWs…they won't allow themselves to be released out of order, as it were. First in, first out, basically."

Tural nodded in understanding. "I think I read something about that in a briefing, that the three thousand POWs in the transport are the longest held. She is in that group."

"True, but it all adds up to odd. At the end of the day, all that matters is the League signing a legitimate peace treaty with us, so you won't see me complaining too much about the order of POW release…just as long as we get all of them."

"I'm not sure I see what you do, sir. But I can't disagree that she needs more help. I'll continue to have her health monitored and get a counselor to follow up."

"Thank you, Doctor," David said as he turned to walk out of the medical bay and back to his duties of preparing for the diplomatic dinner the next night. Stretching his neck from one side to other, thoughts raced through David's brain. *This just doesn't make sense… the League's never been interested in peace. We're being told exactly what we want to hear. Now I sound like one of those crazies on the holonets. Focus, David. Play this out and do it the right way.*

25

David woke up the next morning at 0430 hours and went about his morning routine. First, he went to the officer's gym for a forty-five-minute workout, then he showered, shaved, and readied himself for the day. Since this morning was the first full day in space and under way, he'd decided to attend the morning flag ceremony. Held onboard every CDF ship in space at 0800 hours in the largest cargo bay onboard, the flag was raised, the anthem was played, and honors were rendered. For reasons he couldn't readily explain, seeing the flag raised and saluting it with his brothers and sisters in arms reminded him that he was part of something bigger than himself. It was a feeling that sustained him, even when things looked bleak. For him, the flag of Terran Coalition stood for something; it stood for freedom and justice, ideas that were worth fighting for, just as his father had taught him.

At 0730, he stepped out of his office and began making his way down the one-point-two-kilometer-long vessel; even with automatic grav lifts, it simply took a while to walk from the bow of the ship to the stern cargo bay. As David entered the cavernous bay, he saw a sea of people inside;

hundreds of CDF members and a number of people in civilian attire, whom he assumed were contractors.

A sharp-eyed chief petty officer noticed David as he walked in and announced his presence. “Colonel on deck!” The assembled crewmen and women braced at attention to acknowledge him.

David immediately said, “As you were.” The crowd relaxed and began to line up in rows facing the portable flagpole standing in the middle of the bay. He remembered that there was a small Marine Corps band onboard, hastily assembled for rendering honors when the League delivered the former POW, Captain Borrego, and he hoped they would be in attendance for the ceremony.

At 0755, the 1MC came to life with an announcement from Sheila. “Attention, all hands, first call! First call to Colors!” Over the next couple of minutes, even more crewmen and officers streamed into the bay. David was sure that at least eight hundred people all told were stacked into the cargo bay.

A few moments before 0800, the Marine Color Guard paraded into the bay, carrying the flag of the Terran Coalition, the battle flag of the Coalition Defense Force, and the CDF Marine flag, followed by a small Marine Corps band. At 0800 sharp, the bugler sounded the call for attention, and all uniformed members of the CDF came to attention.

A moment after the bugle call ended, the Marine band began to play the Anthem of the Terran Coalition. David and everyone else in uniform brought their hands to their brows and sharply saluted the colors for the duration of the anthem, while the civilians placed their right hands over their hearts. As the music was played, a separate Terran Coalition flag was attached to the flagpole and slowly hoisted to full mast. As the last bars of the anthem were played and the sound of music ended, hands were lowered. The drum

major leading the band raised her voice, speaking toward David. “Colonel, would you lead us in the pledge of allegiance, sir?”

David stepped forward, and still facing the colors, came to attention and saluted. His words echoed loudly across the cargo bay. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Terran Coalition and to the republic for which it stands. Many nations, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” Modeled after the American pledge of allegiance, it was known by virtually every citizen within the Terran Coalition. Repeated every morning by every child in school, at every national event, and at the swearing in of politicians, it contained the core of what the Terran Coalition stood for. Lowering his hand to his side, he completed the pledge and glanced at the drum major, indicating for her to continue.

“Thank you, sir,” she said before ordering the bugle call for “Carry On.” At that, the assembled company began to depart.

David decided to stay behind and talk to the band for a moment. “Master Sergeant Poirier,” he said, addressing the drum major. “An outstanding performance.”

“Thank you, sir,” Poirier said stoically.

“I can’t say I’ve ever seen a Marine Corps band on a ship before.”

The trace of a smile graced her face. “First time I’ve ever been on a ship underway to play music anyway.”

David raised an eyebrow. “I must confess, I have little knowledge of how the band works. Have you been deployed as well?”

“I have, three times. That bit about ‘everyone is a rifleman’ isn’t just a slogan, sir.”

David nodded, smiling. “Well, glad to have you on board. Though I am not entirely sure I’m looking forward to us playing the League’s anthem on our flight deck.”

She made a face. “I’m not looking forward to playing it, sir.”

David laughed. “Well, hopefully, it will help toward a lasting peace.”

“I hope so, sir. I really do. We all do.”

“Carry on, Master Sergeant, and thank you for a beautiful ceremony,” David said, preparing to leave.

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” she said in response as he turned and walked out of the cargo bay.

26

INSIDE OF THE large officer's gym on the *Lion*, TCMC Lieutenant Colonel Calvin Demood took out his stress on a punching bag, dressed in his workout clothes as opposed to a duty uniform. Stepping back a moment for a breather, he saw Lieutenant Robert Taylor at a nearby station practicing as well. He watched him for several seconds before Taylor dropped his hands from the bag. He decided to strike up a conversation.

"Pretty good for a comms geek, Lieutenant."

Taylor glanced over to him and flashed a quick smile. "I grew up fighting, Colonel. My father made Master Guns, not to mention some uncles, an aunt, and a few older cousins in the Marines."

"But you became a comms geek?" Calvin asked with a chuckle.

"Well, you go with your strengths. I've always been good working with technology and signals." Taylor made a face. "And I've already heard all the tech geek jokes from my cousins, so you don't need to bother."

"Hey, I'm too experienced to pull that crap on you computer nerds, had too many of you guys pull me out of the

fryer." Calvin laughed. "So do you think this is going to work out? This peace stuff?"

"Well, who knows? The League's never talked peace before, but after all these years, you never know how they're feeling about it." Taylor shrugged. "I mean, think of how they acted toward us, attacking almost out of the blue, and you wonder how many other civilizations and nations they've pissed off and who want a piece of them. I know they've angered the hell out of the Saurians as it is."

"Oh really? Guess you learn those sorts of things listening to conversations for a living all day." Calvin smirked at him. "So, want to show this hard-ass Marine officer just what your cousins taught you? I'm tired of smacking punching bags around."

Taylor returned the smirk with one of his own. "Sure, Colonel. I'll even go easy on you. Wouldn't want you to break a hip trying to keep up with a young guy like me."

"A wise guy too. Damn, you must have had an interesting family. Well, let's hurry up so I can kick your ass in time for a shower before meeting our guests."

The two men walked over to a sparring mat and faced off. Calvin asked, "Are we boxing or doing martial arts here, Lieutenant?"

Taylor smiled. "Anything you want, Colonel."

With that, Calvin stepped forward and threw a standard sucker punch at Taylor, thinking that the young man was all talk and little experience. He might as well have thrown a paper airplane. Taylor dodged the punch by stepping to one side and brought his arm down sharply, striking him on his elbow, inflicting pain and a stunning blow. A couple of Marines that had been watching the exchange in passing interest stopped what they were doing and stared.

"Ah, martial arts it is, then." *Pretty quick on his feet for a comms guy.*

Calvin closed the distance between them and delivered a series of karate moves that Taylor deftly met blow for blow. Taylor then stepped into the attack, grabbed his right arm, and flipped the older man on his back. Standing over him, Taylor stuck his arm out. "Best of out three, Colonel?"

Calvin grabbed the arm and helped himself up. "Sure, but we're doing pugil sticks next."

David stood in front of the mirror in his main cabin, which was more of a small apartment than a stateroom. Having served on smaller ships for most of his career, he was used to the cramped quarters of destroyers and frigates. On the *Lion*, however, junior officer's staterooms were larger than his old commanding officer's quarters on the *Rabin*.

Above all else, he hated wearing dress uniforms. Tonight's dinner called for full dress, and David's uniform had to be immaculate. He also had to wear his entire set of campaign ribbons, pin insignia, and medals. He found the entire display to be ostentatious, as he tried to downplay any rewards or recognition that he received.

David had on occasion turned down three Purple Hearts, an award that carried over to the CDF from the American military that was awarded for being wounded in combat. *I don't deserve medals for minor wounds that barely slowed me down. The men and women who lost limbs, suffered irreparable brain damage, and were maimed for life… they're the ones that deserve it. Not a fleet officer in full control of his body.*

He fastened the block of campaign ribbons to his right, his medals to his left, followed by his Space Warfare Officer insignia, and Command-In-Space insignia. David considered the medals and reflected on his mixed feelings. On one hand, he was proud of his efforts for the cause, a cause he believed

in with every fiber of his being. What wasn't lost on him, though, was that he was in effect rewarded for killing his fellow man. That fact caused him great guilt and it tore at him every time he let it catch up with him in his thoughts.

David knew that fighting the League and killing those who fought for it was required, but he also knew that most of its soldiers were conscripts, brainwashed into fighting, and that those who wouldn't fight were shot. That didn't stop him from looking down at his hands and seeing blood when he reflected on his past deployments. Pushing those thoughts out of his head, he tried to focus on the task before him tonight, ensuring as much as he could that the killing stopped.

The chime to his door sounded. "Open," he said nearly automatically, knowing that Sheila was on her way to walk with him to the hangar deck.

Sheila strode into David's cabin, put together and ready to go. "It's almost time…done preening yet?" Sheila asked in a playful tone.

"You know I hate dressing up." *Sometimes I wonder at how she teases me. It's almost like she*—likes—*me*.

Sheila laughed. "I'd enjoy it more if these uniforms were remotely flattering."

David couldn't stopped himself from snickering, which got him a withering look. "How are preparations going?"

"The mess stewards are preparing the meals using VIP fresh food for once; the honor guard and band are in place. I have to tell you, no one is interested in hearing the League anthem played," Sheila said with a bit of a smirk.

"I actually prefer the basic frozen meals." David finished fastening his final medal. "Getting invited to the chief's mess is even better," he said, reminded that the chiefs ate the best on any ship.

He turned to face her. “Are you okay, Sheila?” The use of her name indicated openly between them that this was a moment between friends, not commander and subordinate.

“I’m just worried, David,” she said. “I know you’re hoping this turns out for the best, but now they’ve got the man who killed your father here.”

“I know, but I’m not upset about it. He was the guy in charge, sure, but not the man who ordered the attack,” David replied, but inside, he knew that wasn’t entirely true. As much as he tried to suppress it, he couldn’t push out of his mind that Seville was the evil that caused twenty-seven years of war. *He ought to pay for what he’s done*.

“David…I know you better than that. I know that you’re bitter about it, but you can’t let that get to you,” Sheila said, putting her hand on his arm. “We need peace, David. You must remember that.”

“How can I not think about the fact that my father died ramming his flagship…and the tens of thousands other fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters that perished at that battle, Sheila,” David snapped, pain and frustration breaking through his carefully crafted mask. “I think we’re negotiating openly with a pack of liars who didn’t give us much of a chance for peace before they sent an armada to try and destroy our home world! I’m thinking of all the good men and women I’ve met in my life who are dead and gone because the League kept attacking us even when we don’t do a damned thing to them! I’m thinking that there can’t be any peace at all with the League, so long as they believe they and they alone have a right to decide how people should work, believe, and live!”

“David…” Sheila said with a look of grave concern on her face.

Before she could finish interrupting, David brought his hand up and continued to speak. “And, above all else, Sheila,

I'm thinking about how much I hate doing this job." When she made no move to continue, he followed through on this statement. "I don't mind being a soldier. Always thought I would. I never liked being told what to do and when to do it, but I ended up being a pretty decent soldier. What I do mind is having to go out every day and kill other people, even people as bad as the League. Killing our fellow man… that's *not* something we should be able to do lightly, even if we think they deserve it. We have no right to take life as easily as we do. The press of a button and thousands die? We talk about being nations under God…one of the Ten Commandments: thou shall not murder. Oh, we hide it, we justify it, but when one of our bombs goes off target and kills a hundred civilians, what does that make us? What have we become?" he asked in a rhetorical manner, taking a breath before he continued.

"So, yes, I think this is going to go nowhere. I think the League's going to keep trying to grind us under until one or both of our nations are destroyed, but it doesn't matter, because if we can have an end to this killing, even if just for a few decades, that will be well worth having to sit across the table from the man my father died fighting and eating a peaceful meal with him. Oh, I'll even gladly toast his health if only it brings an end to this war," David said with emphasis on the final few words. "And we're going to be late if we don't start walking now." He forced an uncomfortable grin at her and walked toward the door.

Sheila turned her head and began to follow him, her face a frown with her mouth hanging open.

I may have overdone it a little, there. Okay, David. Time to get your head on straight.

27

In the cavernous flight deck of the *Lion of Judah*, the ship's company had literally rolled out the red carpet for the League delegation. There was an actual red carpet for the League officers to walk out of their shuttle on, along with the flags of the Terran Coalition and the League of Sol, displayed on poles off to the side. The Marine Band and the honor guard, also Marines, were in full-dress uniforms, consisting of bright red uniform jackets, polished belts with gold buckles, and smartly pressed white pants, finished off with spit-shined black shoes. Looking over them as he strode onto the flight deck in his own full-dress uniform, David chuckled to himself. Leave it to the Marines to always be the best dressed. He made his way over to the drum major and complimented her on the band's appearance. "So are we entertaining the President of the Coalition or the Admiral in charge of the League invasion of Canaan?" David asked the Master Sergeant Poirier.

She looked back at him, coming to attention along with the rest of the Marines. It was customary on a ship that the commanding officer, or any officer for that matter, had honors rendered upon first meeting of the day by any given enlisted personnel. The Marines, though, seemed to love to

salute at the drop of a hat. “As you were,” David said to the band, and they all relaxed. The way Marines all moved together like a human wave had always impressed David. He doubted he would have succeeded as a Marine.

“I’d much rather it be the president, sir, though he would have his own band,” she said with a smile.

“The President’s Own, right?” David asked.

“Yes, sir. It’s the most elite group of musicians in the Coalition Marine Corps. Someday, I’d love to play with them.”

“Never give up on a dream. Before you and the band disembark, I’ve got to hear how you decided to join the Marines to be in the band,” David said, grinning.

Poirier laughed. “I get that a lot. It’s a fun one.”

“We’d better finish getting ready. I understand that the League really likes to be punctual. Something about the trains running on time,” David said with a smirk. “Carry on, Master Sergeant.”

“Yes, sir!” Poirier said crisply.

David strode over to the rest of his senior officers: Sheila, Hanson, Calvin, Amir, and Dr. Tural. Master Chief Tinetariro was present as well, with a contingent of enlisted crewmen in dress uniforms.

“Ready to go, ladies and gentlemen?” he asked them with a smile.

Sheila spoke for the group. “Oh, yes, sir. We’re just longing to have dinner with a shuttle full of League officers. Anything for peace, right?”

An announcement filled the flight deck. “League shuttle arrival in thirty seconds.”

“Okay, everyone, look alive!” David’s voice carried across the deck.

The Marines braced to attention, as did the enlisted crewmen. David and the rest of the officers took their

positions as the League shuttle glided into the bay and set down gently next to the red carpet. After a moment, its side door opened, and a small honor guard strode out, goose-stepping down the ramp. Admiral Seville led the way, followed by several officers in full dress uniforms. A man in civilian attire came toward the end; David recognized him as the diplomatic minister, Jenner. As the last Leaguer exited the shuttle, Master Chief Tinetariro trilled her bosun's pipe, piping them aboard with honors.

The gunnery sergeant in charge of the TCMC Honor Guard announced in a formal voice, "Arms, port!" The Marines snapped their gleaming rifles to port arms. "Attention, colors!" he bellowed.

At this, the band stood and began to play the anthem of the Terran Coalition; every member of the TCMC and CDF within the bay stood at attention and saluted. Admiral Seville and his officers also brought themselves to attention but did not salute. Minister Jenner placed his hand over his heart in what David thought was a show of respect.

As the final bars ended, there was a pregnant pause by the band before they then began to play the anthem of the League of Sol. Admiral Seville and the rest of the League contingent brought their hands up to their brows and smartly saluted their colors. David, and everyone else silently stood at attention. *Standing here, listening to this music, is tearing me up inside. I can't begin to believe the Marines aren't hating this even more than I am*. He forced himself to remember that it was a small indignity for peace, and well, the League just rendered honors to the Coalition flag, so maybe it evened out. The League anthem ended, and the band sat down again.

Seville stepped forward and addressed David. "Permission to come aboard, Colonel?"

"Permission granted, Admiral."

“Allow me to introduce Diplomatic Minister Jenner, leader of our peace delegation, Colonel Strappi, the morale officer onboard the *Destruction*, and Fleet Captain Antonov, the commanding officer of my flagship,” Seville said, his face stoic and betraying little emotion.

“A pleasure, gentlemen,” David said, shaking hands with the League officers and Minister Jenner. “Allow me to introduce my senior staff: Major Sheila Thompson, executive officer, Major Arthur Hanson, chief engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Calvin Demood, Marine expeditionary force commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hassan Amir, flight wing commander, and Dr. Izmet Tural, our chief medical officer.”

Seville politely shook the hands of the senior officers as David introduced them.

“If you will follow me, sir, we have a dinner prepared in your honor,” David said as a way of wrapping up the introductions.

“Thank you, Colonel. I would be delighted,” Seville said with a smile on his face. As the League delegation walked away with David, Seville took the lead.

One of the nice things about a gigantic ship, David pondered, is that it has various rooms and venues that a smaller destroyer simply doesn’t have. On the *Rabin*, if they’d ever had a VIP onboard, which was unlikely to begin with, the wardroom would have been used for a dining hall. But on the *Lion*, they had a purpose-built dining room for guest VIPs. Following procedure, the *Lion*’s senior officers were in attendance, and Admiral Seville had brought his senior officers and staff. Not quite one for one as the regs suggested, but it was close enough. He’d reluctantly allowed Dr. Hayworth to join the dinner after Major Merriweather

had suggested repeatedly that Hayworth was highly thought of, even in the League. Maybe he'd find some common ground with them. The last thing he needed now was the temperamental doctor causing problems in what needed to be a productive discussion.

David was seated at the head of table as the commanding officer, Seville was seated at the other end, and the various officers were intermingled with each other. The League's senior diplomat, Minister Jenner, sat on David's right.

Mess stewards brought in the first course of the meal as small talk was exchanged amongst the various guests. Jenner glanced at David. "Colonel, I must confess, we were shocked that you were sent to escort us."

David raised an eyebrow in question. "Why is that, Minister?"

Jenner offered a small smile. "Our intelligence service was not aware that the Victory Project was this close to completion. It took us by surprise."

David returned the smile while the wheels turned in his head. *Why would he let that slip*? "Perhaps the League's intelligence gathering within the Terran Coalition isn't what it used to be," David said, trying to inject some humor and wondering if what he really meant was that they were astonished that David had been chosen to command the ship provided for escort, given the history between his father and Seville.

"Perhaps," Jenner said with a polite chuckle. "Tell me, Colonel, how do you view our chances for peace?"

David eyed Jenner. Sheila, who sat several chairs down on the left, overheard Jenner's question and looked toward David with a cautious expression. "I'm not sure, Minister. I'm hopeful that we can come to an agreement. No one in their right mind wants to get up each morning and go kill people."

Jenner nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I see. Our propaganda says that all members of the Coalition Defense Force relish combat and long to die as martyrs for God.” The last bit of the sentence was said with a lighter lilt.

Sheila took the opportunity to interject, seeing David’s dark expression. “Well, Minister, I think that’s some bad intel,” she said with a light expression and tone. “We put an overwhelming emphasis on not dying.”

Calvin spoke up. “We Marines have another way of putting it. It’s not our job to die for our country; our job is to make the other guy die for his.”

There were some chuckles out of the people that heard him, including Jenner and David. “Point taken, Colonel Demood,” Jenner said. “Our own Marines have a similar saying. I think that sentiment traces all the way back to Earth.”

Catching his breath from laughing, David interjected, “I believe the earliest known expression of it is from a senator from ancient Rome. Cicero, if memory serves.”

Jenner turned to look at David with a quizzical expression. “You know Earth history, Colonel?” he asked, his tone implying this was some major revelation.

David couldn’t control the snicker that left his lips. “Yes, Minister. It’s in our school studies, and I took several courses on Earth history during my time at the Space Warfare College. I can’t tell you how many books I’ve read on the subject. History is fascinating to me.”

Jenner looked to the captain of the *Destruction*, Zehnya Antonov, who was several chairs down. “It appears that much of our intelligence is wrong.”

Calvin, who sat to the left of David, said sotto voice to him, “No wonder we keep kicking these guy’s asses.”

David couldn’t help but smirk at Calvin’s comment, even though he detested cursing. As the mess stewards finished

setting down all the plates for the first course, which consisted of a salad, he cleared his throat. “Ladies, gentlemen, honored guests,” he said in a voice that carried over the rest. “It is CDF custom that before a meal, we offer thanks and ask for blessing to our Creator. I realize that we have in attendance those who do not believe; you should feel no obligation to join us.” He glanced toward Rabbi Kravitz. “Rabbi, please lead us in a blessing.” It was wardroom tradition that the prayer was offered in the faith of the commanding officer, and since David was Jewish, he had invited the rabbi to the dinner.

Kravitz made eye contact with several around him before bowing his head. The rest of the CDF officers did the same; Jenner joined in out of respect. The rest of the League officers simply looked at each other, while Dr. Hayworth made a display of rolling his eyes. “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, by Whose word all things came to be. Bless this food and our purpose here.” As he finished, the rest of the CDF officers raised their heads once more.

David picked up his glass and took a sip of water. “Thank you, Rabbi.”

“If I may, Colonel…” Seville said from the other end of the table. “I propose a toast for this fine occasion. The first time in four hundred years that our two sections of humanity have sat down together to discuss peace.”

Several heads turned toward David. He offered a diplomatic smile and raised his glass. “To peace then, Admiral.”

“Indeed. To peace for all mankind, regardless of ideology.” Seville ignored the stern look from Strappi as the assembled officers took a drink in unison. “These years of war have been a terrible waste of life and treasure, you understand. The League can no more sustain this bloodshed

than you can, I would imagine, and it is time to end the fighting. It is time for peace."

"Peace," David said, nodding. "I only hope it's something that lasts instead of the usual peace."

"The usual peace, Colonel?" Jenner asked.

"A peace that is just to give everyone time to prepare for the next war."

Silence broke out at the dinner table. Sheila looked at David with a scowl on her face, as if to say "What?!" Seville, however, looked at David for a quiet moment before he laughed out loud. "Ah, wonderful wit, Colonel," he proclaimed. "Such cynicism! It breeds so well in people of our occupation, doesn't it? Having death as a constant companion, never knowing when it will claim a friend, a lover, even oneself."

"It's an occupational hazard, Admiral," David said, determined not to show any overt weakness.

"It's nothing to be ashamed about, after all. All soldiers have to live with death hovering over their shoulder." Seville took a drink and put his glass down. "Hopefully, we can soon exorcise that specter, or at least reduce it."

"It will be a proud moment for us all when peace is restored," Sheila said. She exchanged glances with David before continuing. "A just peace that we can build on to something greater."

"A reunion of all mankind under one banner is our ultimate goal," Zehnya Antonov stated. "Humans together under a banner of brotherhood and solidarity."

"Brotherhood and solidarity must ultimately mean tolerance toward each other's differences," Dr. Tural said. "Otherwise, what you have is not brotherhood; it is the tyranny of the majority or whomever holds power."

"There are things that can be tolerated and things that cannot," Strappi said. "A united mankind cannot easily

tolerate those who wish to divide it; such is an oxymoron and can lead to that very division."

David cleared his throat. "Our two… branches of humanity have very different ideas about the state, Colonel. We, the Terran Coalition, collectively believe that freedom is the cure to most things that ail us. The state should offer a framework for its citizens to thrive within, but not control their lives."

Seemingly undeterred, Strappi pressed on. "In the League, by defining the roles of our citizens and the rules they must follow, we give them freedom to thrive."

"But who decides what can be tolerated and what cannot?" Dr. Tural asked. "Does any person have the wisdom to do such things?"

"Our people trust the State with such duty. The State, after all, represents the accumulated will and knowledge of the people."

"And if the State is ever wrong?" David asked pointedly.

"The State is the embodiment of the people. It *can't* be wrong," Strappi insisted. "And it is preferable to allowing the superstitious to decide such issues. For instance, you, Dr. Hayworth." He looked to Hayworth, who glanced up from his food. "Even in the League, your brilliance is known, as is your refusal to hew to the nonsense of those around you. Unlike them, we would not treat you as a moral inferior to be badgered or pitied, but as a man of rational thought and brilliant invention."

Silence reigned over the table for several seconds, with uncomfortable glances everywhere. Hayworth finished chewing on a mouthful of salad and looked intently at Strappi. "How would you treat me, Colonel Strappi, if I refused to aid your government's R&D projects but insisted on having my own? How would you treat me if I proclaimed publicly that Committee Chairman Pallis is a senile old

warmongering idiot and that the entire Social and Public Safety Committee should be tossed out on its ass?"

Strappi's face contorted, but before he could speak, Jenner intervened in the discussion. "It appears, ladies and gentlemen, that there are quite a few things still dividing our sections of humanity," he said carefully, "but we can still live peacefully regardless of this."

"We live in hope, Minister," David answered quietly.

"Oh, I think the Colonel has brought up something important," Hayworth said, drawing a nasty look from David. "The League offers a Faustian bargain."

"What the heck is that?" Calvin whispered toward David.

"Deal with the devil."

"They supposedly offer their citizens everything yet operate a data and AI driven police state that monitors all aspects of everyone's life. You can't walk too fast in the League without getting in trouble," Hayworth continued.

"And the Terran Coalition doesn't have its own rules and controls, Doctor?" Strappi said. "In a society that's predominately religious, aren't you a second-class citizen? The only difference is that the League's rules come from the state, while yours supposedly come from an imaginary figure in the sky."

Jenner cleared his throat loudly. "I think we should all move on."

"Agreed," David said, letting out a sigh. "My mother always said to avoid politics and religion at the dinner table."

The injection of humor into the tense situation seemed to do the trick. After a few well-placed chuckles, Hayworth and Strappi were silent, while the others made small talk. For the rest of the dinner, which consisted of a main course, followed by desserts and coffee, they avoided the touchy subjects. David decided by the end of the dinner that while he'd never trust Seville and he couldn't stand Strappi—after

all, League political officers were hated even by their own—Jenner seemed to genuinely want peace.

"Minister, you seem to be invested in this peace process. If I may, why?" David asked of Jenner as the other officers talked amongst themselves.

"The truth is, Colonel, I lost two children to this war. Both of my sons," Jenner said with more than a trace of sadness.

David sat back slightly in his chair. *Great, I just stepped in it.*

Before he could respond, however, Jenner continued. "I don't blame you for their deaths, nor anyone in the Coalition Defense Force. After all, we fired the first shots of the war."

David's eyebrows shot up; the League had always claimed that the Terran Coalition had attacked first.

"I was under the impression that the League felt we started the war, Minister," David said neutrally.

"There is fact and then there is truth, Colonel. We both know what the truth is. I'm tired of war, and the faction I represent within the League Social and Public Safety Committee is tired of war too. We're here to forge peace. I hope that your people share that goal,"

"While I'm sure there's a person or two in the Terran Coalition that can't see past the hatred for the League, I think nearly everyone else prefers a just peace with honor," David said.

"I hope your leaders are of the same mind as us," Jenner said, and raised his glass with a smile.

"Perhaps the best way to deal with this is just put a couple of weary soldiers in the same room and let them come to a compromise."

Jenner laughed. "The war would be over in fifteen minutes."

David smiled and took a sip from his glass. Soon the dinner was over, and it was time for the League contingent to leave. Seville spoke from his end of the table. “Colonel Cohen, I must commend you on being an excellent host. We will take our leave now, but know that this gesture on your part is truly touching to me.”

As Seville and his officers stood, David and his did as well. “Thank you, Admiral. I wish you a good journey, long life, and good health,” he said without a trace of sarcasm. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Sheila rolling her eyes at him.

Seville too kept a neutral expression. “You as well, Colonel.” While he and his officers headed for the hatch, David walked over to stand beside it, shaking the hands of all as they left. When Seville reached him, he paused. “Colonel, do you mind if I pay my final respects to Captain Barrigo? I found her conduct in captivity to be… inspiring. Always staying true to her oath to resist.”

David looked to Tural, who nodded. “A moment, Admiral.” Tural walked over to the wall monitor with David and Seville following. He tapped a key on it and said, “Patch to medical bay.” After a moment, the image of a nurse popped up. “Nurse, is Captain Barrigo available?”

“Yes, Doctor. One moment.” The nurse moved out of the image. Some moments later, Barrigo stepped into the view.

Seeing her, Tural said, “Adriana, this is Admiral Seville. I’m not sure you’ve met.”

“We haven’t,” Barrigo said.

“I would just like to thank you for playing a role in the peace to come, good captain,” Seville said. “And please, do give greetings to your father on my behalf?”

“Greetings to my father?” Barrigo seemed to think for a moment. “Oh, yes, of course, Admiral. I would be honored.”

“Thank you, my dear. May you have a pleasant life.” Smiling, Seville nodded to Tural and began to walk over to David, who had been watching quietly.

“I’ll be along shortly to check on your status, Adriana,” Tural assured her, after which he turned the monitor off.

As Seville exited the room, Sheila walked up to David. “What was all that about, you think?” she asked quietly.

“I’m not sure, but it was weird.”

David and Sheila, along with the TCMC honor guard, walked silently back to the shuttle bay with the League contingent. As they boarded the shuttle to return to their ship, Seville was last to board. He looked back at David. “It took me a few minutes, Colonel. I recognize your name now.” Seville touched under his right eye, which was obviously artificial. “I’m quite sure your father would be proud of you.”

David’s face clouded over. “I like to think so,” he said.

“A man… fighting only to defend his home and family. No ideology, no beliefs, simple self-defense of what one cherishes.” Seville cracked a smile. “Far purer motives, I would say, than some have fought for. But I must be off, Colonel. Have a pleasant day and thank you for your hospitality.” He stepped into the shuttle fully, watching David intently as the shuttle doors slid closed.

Sheila looked to David and said, “You look tired. Shouldn’t you take some down time? We’re due to jump into Canaan soon.”

David glanced at her with his expression betraying his relief. “I plan on it, XO. Put our relief on the bridge and get some rest. We need to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

28

LATER THAT EVENING, David reviewed reports in his quarters, wrapping up the copious amounts of paperwork required for the trip. He was relieved to be out of his formal dress uniform. The ship had jumped about an hour previously and was in a standard parking orbit of Canaan, closely escorting the *Destruction* and the transport. He had tried to sleep but had found himself unable to get his mind off the meeting with Seville and the conversation over dinner with Jenner. It had entered his mind to ask Dr. Tural to prescribe him something to help him unwind, but then he'd be groggy the next day, and he didn't want to have to explain the side effects. At least, that was normally what happened when he took something to bring sleep.

Looking over personnel transfer requests, he kept absentmindedly playing through the night's conversations in his mind. Noting that he would never invite Hayworth to another diplomatic function, David kept going over Seville's comments, looking for weaknesses and strategies. He believed that you had to truly study an enemy and get into the enemy's head to be able to counter them effectively, and Seville was to be handled no differently, peace treaty or no.

Something bothered him about the evening. He couldn't put his finger on it; he was pretty sure that Jenner was genuinely interested in peace. Seville, on the other hand, oozed a kind of fake charm that put every gut feeling David had on battle stations. He replayed his interactions with Seville over and over, and something struck him as odd about Seville's request to talk to Captain Barrigo. Something just wasn't right; his mind zeroed in on the phrase "And please, do give greetings to your father on my behalf?" He navigated on his tablet to the guest list for the reception on Canaan for the League peace mission.

Going through the list, he quickly determined that Barrigo's father was on the guest list. "So why would Seville want to give his regards to her father through her?" David wondered out loud to no one in particular. He quickly decided to go down and talk to Barrigo again. He jumped out of his chair, reached for his normal uniform, and quickly put it on. He brought the comm device on his wrist up to his mouth. "Cohen to Tural," he said into it.

A moment later, he received an answer. "Dr. Tural here. What can I do for you, Colonel?"

"Are you in the medical bay monitoring Captain Barrigo?"

"No, I left Dr. Bhatt in charge."

"Meet me in the medical bay, then, Doctor." David left his room and walked down the passageway quickly. He brought his comm device back up and made another call. "Cohen to bridge."

The command duty officer answered. "Bridge, go ahead, Colonel."

"Bridge, monitor all communications by the League ships. Quietly."

"Aye, sir."

"Cohen out," David said and continued walking with purpose; he got into a gravlift and took it to deck seven,

which housed the main medical bay. Sheila was waiting for him outside of the lift.

"What's going on, sir?" she asked. "The command duty officer called me and alerted me to your orders. Is something wrong?" she added with a look of concern on her face.

Sheila followed David as he glanced over his shoulder at her. "Something's going on. Seville's comments were off. I couldn't put my finger on it for most of the time, but it just felt wrong."

"What felt wrong?"

"Seville's desire to contact Barrigo. Why? She's going to be at the ceremony and reception; they could talk there. And 'giving his greetings to her father?' Javier Barrigo's supposed to be there too," David replied.

Sheila looked at him, clearly bewildered. "Maybe Seville's not attending?"

"He's on the list as well. Why wouldn't he be? He's the head of the military detachment to the mission. No, I think that was some kind of code…" David trailed off, his mind racing as he bounded through the passageway.

Sheila tried to get in front of David to slow him down, but he blew right past her. "Code for what? Listen to yourself, David… I think you're getting paranoid just because… why? Seville maybe thinks he won't get to see Barrigo and her father, so he calls her while here and asks for her to say hello for him? Yeah, its weird, but we can't go derailing the peace process."

"Or it's a pre-arranged signal for her to attempt some kind of sabotage on our ship," David pointed out. "Either way, I have to be sure. I need you on the bridge to make certain nothing untoward happens."

Sheila glared at David. "You're actually going to accuse Adriana Barrigo of being a League agent? Because of… *this?*" She stepped in front of him again and blocked an internal

bulkhead door, forcing him to look at her and stop walking. "Listen to yourself, David! You're sounding like one of those nutjobs who rant on the holonets about 'spies' and 'saboteurs' being everywhere!"

David set his jaw. "Listen, Sheila... it doesn't *feel* right. All of my instincts are telling me something is wrong here." Seeing she wouldn't be budged, David drew in a sigh. "I'm not going to call up Seville ranting and raving about treachery, okay? I'm not going to jeopardize the peace process just in case I'm wrong about this. But remember, she's been a League prisoner for almost a decade now. There have already been cases of long-time POWs being recovered and turning out to have become League sympathizers. Who knows what kind of brainwashing or psychological conditioning they could have subjected Barrigo to?"

"But what purpose would it serve?" Sheila asked. "The League is already succeeding against us militarily. They don't need some fake peace offer." Her eyes met his. She had begun to consider what he was saying.

"They may be winning on the battlefield lately, but every time they start another spring offensive, they gain for a while, and then we push them back, typically after the Saurians donate some ships to us under that lend/lease program they run. Or a Matrinid battle group happens to find a League battle group in its space and destroys it. Our allies may not be fully involved in our war, but they help us enough to keep the League in check." David paused, his gaze drilling into her. "Canaan is under-defended due to this summit coming up. The only ships there are mostly laid up in the docks; their crews reassigned or on home leave. The Home Defense Fleet will be on standby, but all the League needs is a few shots to annihilate entire cities and kill millions. Think about what would happen if they successfully

attacked Canaan? Our morale would collapse. It would bring the war directly to our capital and prove that no one is safe."

Sheila took a half step back. "Promise me you'll do nothing we can't take back, David."

"I'm not nuts. You've trusted me for years, Sheila. Trust me one more time. I just want to have a conversation with her and have the doctor do some further tests," David said quietly.

Sheila stepped to one side to let him pass. "Orders, sir?" she asked, equally quiet and subdued.

"Get to the bridge and get Colonel Demood and some Marines down to the medical bay. I want two sentries posted from now until we get her off the ship," David said with the voice of command he had worked to perfect.

"Yes, sir. I'll be on the bridge." Sheila turned to go and began to walk off before she stopped and turned back toward him. "David, I pray to God with everything in me that you're wrong."

David looked back at her. "So do I, Sheila…so do I."

David continued forward at a pace that was nearly a run toward the medical bay; he reached it before Calvin and the Marines. Walking into the room, he glanced around quickly, looking for the medical personnel. Taking in the scene, he immediately knew he had been right; Barrigo was gone, and the on-duty medical personnel, including a nurse and Dr. Bhatt, were on the ground unconscious. He rushed over and checked the pulses of both and found them to be strong and steady. David picked up the nurse and placed her onto a nearby vacant bed, starting the diagnostic program. As he did this, Doctor Tural strode into the medical bay. "By Allah, what happened here, Colonel?" Tural asked, alarmed.

"I found them like this, Doctor. Help me get Dr. Bhatt up."

The two men picked up Bhatt and put him into a bed as well. David looked to Tural. “Can you wake one of them up, Doctor? Barrigo is gone, and we need to know what happened.”

Tural checked the vitals of Bhatt and looked at David. “I believe I can wake him with no adverse effects.” As David watched, Tural injected Bhatt with a vial of liquid. After a few moments, the older man began to wake.

David stepped close to Bhatt’s bedside. “Dr. Bhatt. This is Colonel Cohen. Can you hear me? Who attacked you?”

Bhatt looked up, dazed. “Colonel…Doctor…”

His eyes rolled into the back of his head and David shook him. “Stay with me, Doctor,” David said hastily.

“Barrigo attacked us…” Bhatt got out quietly. “She drugged both me and my nurse.”

While Bhatt spoke, Calvin and several Marines jogged into the medical bay. “Sir, reporting as ordered,” Calvin said.

David looked toward Calvin. “Captain Barrigo attacked the medbay personnel a few minutes ago and fled.” David’s face hardened. “I have reason to suspect she is possibly acting as a saboteur for the League.”

Calvin’s face twisted like someone had shoved a knife into him between his ribs. He quickly hid the expression, however, and answered, “Understood, sir. I’ll order my squads to break out combat armor and begin a deck by deck search of the ship.”

“Use the ship’s internal security personnel for the search. I need the rest of your Marines ready for a boarding action.”

“The POW transport,” Calvin answered immediately, “getting it in one,” as David liked to say. “I’ll bring up what we know of that ship type from our database and put together a boarding plan.”

“Very well. Move out, Colonel Demood.”

Calvin braced to attention before departing with the Marines who were with him in tow.

David could feel Dr. Tural's piercing gaze sinking into his back. He turned around to face the man. "Something wrong, Doctor?"

"You're a little quick to judge, Colonel," Tural said. "It's not unknown for rescued POWs to suffer psychological episodes due to a trigger."

"Maybe so, but given the circumstances, I'm just trying to be on the safe side," David stated before softening his tone and words. "No matter what happened, she's one of us, and I want to give her as much leeway as I can."

"Bridge to Colonel Cohen," Sheila's voice called over David's comm.

He raised the comm on his wrist and spoke into it. "Go ahead, Major," David said.

Sheila's voice continued. "Internal sensors haven't found her yet. I've got Hanson and Merriweather working on fine-tuning the system. We're not sure if it's messed up or we just don't quite understand its quirks yet."

"Understood. I'll be joining the search teams." David tapped a button and cut the call. "Doctor, I'll have the sergeant-at-arms post men here in case she doubles back. If you see her…"

"Call you and security immediately," Tural finished.

David nodded and walked out of the room, pausing at an emergency security panel long enough to input his command code and retrieve an energy pulse sidearm. He forced himself not to consider the implications of the situation, and instead solve one problem at a time. The problem now was Captain Barrigo; He hoped against hope that there was an explanation for the events of the last thirty minutes that didn't involve the League staging the entire thing.

The League's peace delegation consisting of half a dozen ambassadors, aides, and diplomatic ministry officials boarded a specially outfitted shuttle that had been stripped of all weapons in the cavernous flight bay of the *Destruction*. Admiral Seville strode in through the nearest doors and made his way over to Jenner; in tow as always, was the political officer, Colonel Strappi.

"Greetings, Minister," Seville said.

"Admiral, Colonel," Jenner replied.

Strappi remained mute as Seville continued, "Are you preparing to head to the surface, Minister?"

"Yes, Admiral, I am. Have you reconsidered joining me on the initial shuttle down to Canaan? The Saurian delegation has requested your presence again."

"I don't think it's wise for me to join you, Minister. I represent fear and terror to these people. I came in the night with my fleet of a thousand ships twenty-seven years ago. I took their invincibility away from them, along with their safety." Seville paused and pursed his lips. "They need to see someone new; a man of peace, such as yourself. From there, we can work toward a common goal to end this senseless slaughter. I will come down on another shuttle once you have begun your important work."

"Of course, Admiral." Jenner glanced toward the shuttle as the last of his team boarded. "I will take my leave of you now, then, and see you shortly."

"Good luck, Minister."

"Same to you, Admiral."

Both men quickly made the salute of the League—the closed fist pressed to the chest—as Jenner turned on his heel to depart. Seville watched Jenner as he entered the shuttle,

the hatch closing behind him. Once it was securely shut and the shuttle began to depart, Seville glanced at Strappi.

"That is a pity. I actually like him."

"I worry he suspects."

Seville fought down the desire to openly sneer at Strappi. "Of course he doesn't suspect. He believes we all want a just peace. You worry far too much, Colonel."

"That is my duty, Admiral."

"Of course. Now run along and check up on the crew's morale, then join me on the bridge to watch the Terran Coalition's death throes."

29

STRIDING ONTO THE BRIDGE, Sheila made a beeline for the CO's chair. Ruth had been standing watch as the command duty officer. "I relieve you, Lieutenant Goldberg," she said curtly, approaching the CO's chair.

"I am relieved," Ruth stated formally, standing from the CO's chair and retaking the tactical station.

Speaking to the rest of the bridge, Sheila announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a situation. Master Chief, signal an intruder alert to the sergeant-at-arms, but do not trigger the general alarm."

Tinetariro acknowledged the order. "Yes, ma'am! I'll have security deployed outside of all sensitive areas. Are we looking for something or someone specific?"

"Captain Adriana Barrigo."

Tinetariro's eyebrows shot up. "XO, with respect, what aren't you telling us?"

"Colonel Cohen believes that the captain is possibly under League influence. She assaulted medical bay staff and has disappeared."

A dark cloud descended over the bridge. Sheila and Ruth exchanged glances with each other as all eyes focused on Sheila. "We have to find her now and sort out what's going

on," Sheila said. "TAO, can you calibrate the internal sensors to look specifically for Barrigo?"

"Yes, ma'am! Give me a moment to cross reference her unique signature to our internal sensors." While she spoke, Ruth was already pulling the proper file out of the ship's main security library and plugging it into the internal sensor module. "XO... she's not anywhere on our internal sensor profile," she reported, not seeing Barrigo anywhere on the ship.

"You can't just disappear on this ship..." Sheila was dumbfounded at how the woman could have pulled this off as her opinion of the situation quickly moved to mirror David's. "TAO, run a diagnostic on all weapons systems, specifically looking for sabotage," Sheila commanded directly, her eyes scrunched together and a frown on her face.

"Yes, ma'am!" Ruth said, her mouth remaining open in shock after responding. Working through the various weapon systems, she called out the status of all systems. "So far, no sabotage to the manual systems, auto-loading systems, energy capacitors all report green. Remote gunnery..." Ruth stopped in mid-sentence, a blinking light catching her attention.

"Lieutenant?" Sheila prodded.

"Ma'am, I'm seeing a remote access to our point defense system," Ruth said. "It's not from one of the auxiliary control stations, engineering, or the secondary bridge. Whoever is doing this has set up a wireless connection that is being redirected over an entire section of the ship. This is incredibly skilled hacking."

"Kick them out now, Lieutenant."

"I'm trying, ma'am." Ruth worked through several different commands and security codes before slamming the console with her hands, visibly frustrated. "Whoever it is, is

using a high-level override that I can't defeat." Ruth cranked her head around to face Sheila. "Who the heck is doing this, XO?"

Ignoring Ruth, Sheila brought her personal communicator up to her mouth. "Thompson to Cohen."

After a pause, David's voice crackled through the device. "Go ahead, XO."

"Sir, we've identified an unauthorized access to the remote gunnery system."

"I'm assuming that you've tried to lock the system out without success?"

"Correct, sir. It's using a high-level override."

"Wait one, XO."

Over the active communications link, Sheila heard David attempt to use his own lockout sequence. "Computer, this is Colonel Cohen. Authorization Code Alpha, Tango, November, Bravo, Three Niner One. Terminate all remote gunnery system access."

The computer's reply was immediate. "Function cannot be performed. Gold Level command override in place on existing connection."

Sheila was stunned by the revelation of gold level command. *How the heck did she get her hands on those?* David interrupted her thoughts. "XO, we'd need a flag officer to override those codes. I can't cut it off. Can you tell me where the access is coming from? We can get security units there to stop Captain Barrigo."

"Wait one, sir," Sheila responded and muted the communications channel. "Got any aces up your sleeve, TAO?"

"Ma'am, that signal is being bounced off eighteen different wireless access points. She's using our ship's dispersed control capabilities against us. I've narrowed it

down to a section of the starboard side, above the flight deck. Decks 10 through 14, Sections 20 through 30."

Sheila unmuted the channel. "Sir, starboard side, above the flight deck. Decks 10 through 14, Sections 20 through 30."

Sheila could make out the frustration in David's voice as he responded, "XO, that's a lot of space to cover. Is there any other way to narrow it down? I doubt we've a lot of time here."

Sheila pursed her lips together, trying to run ways to find the elusive woman. Suddenly, a light bulb went off in her head. "Wait a minute, sir. Some of the compartments that house the long-range sensor arrays are completely encased in dampening elements so we don't receive false positive readings. That's where she's at." She pulled up a schematic of the starboard side section of the *Lion* on the monitor above the CO's chair. Quickly, zeroing in on the shielded compartments, Sheila brought up her communicator once more. "Sir, there's three separate compartments she might be in. D11S22, D11S28, and D13SS25."

"Understood, XO. I'll take it from here."

As David's communications link ended, Sheila looked toward Ruth. "TAO, stand by to disable the remote gunnery system as soon as control is restored."

"Yes, ma'am!"

On the bridge of the *Destruction*, Seville looked quietly at a clock. Strappi was nearby, still nervous, while an officer reported, "Minister Jenner's shuttle is away, sir."

"Well, it won't be long now," Seville said with satisfaction. "Put the crew on silent alert. Just in case we have... unforeseen complications."

David killed the communications link and addressed the security personnel with him. “Sergeant,” he said, gesturing to one of the security teams. “Take Section D11S22.” Gesturing to the other team, he continued, “Corporal, take Section D11S28. I’ll handle D13SS25. Remember, Captain Barrigo is one of our own. Use non-lethal force if at all possible. Move out!”

David took off at a run to the section he left for himself to cover; it took him several minutes to cover the distance. Finding the right passageway and then quickly locating the service panel that opened to reveal a very narrow engineering space, he crawled through, pulling out his energy pulse sidearm and pointing it forward as he traversed the crawlspace. After what seemed like an eternity of crawling through the bowels of the ship, he sighted a small workspace area directly ahead. Taking pains to be quiet but still move quickly, he saw Barrigo staring at a control screen.

Back on the bridge of the *Lion*, Ruth called out in alarm. “Conn, TAO. Forward point defense batteries are coming online under remote control!” She watched in horror as a targeting display came alive. “Ma’am, they’re targeting Minister Jenner’s shuttle!”

Sheila stood up from the CO’s chair. “Lock down those weapons, TAO!” she barked.

Ruth shook her head. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I have no control.”

Meanwhile, David was trying to slip into position to ambush Barrigo when his communicator activated. Sheila's near panicked voice came through. "Colonel! She's trying to blow up the League's shuttle!"

This day just keeps getting better. David jumped into the engineering workspace area where Barrigo was set up. Noticing that Barrigo had a small tablet device plugged into one of the ship's data lines with crosshairs on top of a shuttle showing on its screen, he wasted no time. "Barrigo!" he shouted at her. "I don't know what you think you're doing but put that control down now!"

Barrigo looked at him with a blank stare on her face. "I must fire the guns," she said as she turned back to her screen and brought her fingers up to it.

David quickly brought up his energy pulse sidearm and fired a shot into her shoulder. Barrigo cried out in pain, dropping the device to the floor while screaming at the top of her lungs. "I must fire the guns! I must do what my father says!"

David turned up the power to his weapon as she reached down to pick the tablet back up. He fired again, the blast hitting the tablet and incinerating it as well as part of her hand. Screaming, Barrigo fell down to the floor, holding her charred and burnt hand.

On the bridge, Ruth's targeting screen suddenly went black. "Conn, TAO! I've got gunnery control back!" Quickly disarming the point defense systems, she powered down and secured the *Lion*'s weapons suite. "System secure, ma'am."

"Conn, communications. The *Destruction* is warning us to shut down our weapons immediately and explain what is going on," Taylor said.

Sheila allowed herself a sigh of relief. “Communications, tell them that we had a problem when running a diagnostic, but everything has returned to normal.”

Back in the crawlspace, David knelt beside Barrigo. Quickly checking her vitals, he found her pulse to be strong, and the wound on her hand cauterized due to the heat of the energy pulse. He pulled his communicator to his lips. “I need a medical team to D13S25, the lateral access space, now!”

David did what he could to make her comfortable as she whimpered in pain. “Barrigo, I need to know who told you to do this?” he asked as non-threateningly as he could.

Her eyes looked as if they were staring right by him to a point hundreds of miles away. “I must do what my father says,” she cried. “I must be a good girl!”

David tried consoling her instead. “Barrigo, your father is waiting for you. Just a little while longer.”

“No!” she cried out again. “He won’t let me come home if I don’t do what he says. He says to fire the guns! Fire the guns! I must fire the guns!”

30

A FEW MINUTES after the medical team arrived to tend to Barrigo, David exited the gravlift to the passageway leading to the bridge. Exchanging a quick salute with the two Marines guarding the bridge door, he made his way through the hatch and onto the bridge. He had requested that Amir and Calvin join him on the bridge to discuss the situation; he was happy to see that they had made it there ahead of him, as time was a very precious commodity.

Master Chief Tinetariro announced his presence on the bridge. "Colonel on the bridge!"

David said curtly, "As you were." He motioned Sheila, Amir, and Calvin over to the main holographic projector in the middle of the bridge. "XO, colonels."

Sheila was the first to speak. "I'm not sure where to start, sir."

"We'll start with the obvious. This peace deal was a farce, designed possibly to turn the rest of the galaxy against us, or at least give the League a pretext to fire on Canaan."

Calvin made a face. "We should have never trusted those Leaguer bastards. The only good Leaguer is a dead Leaguer, sir."

Sheila's face clouded over at Calvin's words, while Amir looked eager for a fight. David, though, shared Sheila's concerns. "Colonel Demood, I sense that at the very least, Minister Jenner was sincere. That doesn't change what we need to do here, but it's something we should remember."

Sheila picked up where David left off. "We also need to remember that almost all of the people on those League ships are conscripts, and if they won't fight, they and their families are executed for treason."

David cleared his throat as Amir's face twisted. "Be that as it may, we've got a job to do here." Turning to direct his full attention to Calvin, he continued, "Colonel, do we have enough Marines on this ship to secure the POW transport and save our people? We know they're there thanks to the Intergalactic Red Cross visits on the way to Canaan."

Calvin nodded. "I've got three hundred Marines on this ship, Colonel. I'll get them home or I'll die trying. You've got my word on it."

David cracked a smile. "I'm much more interested in you making the other guys die for their country, Colonel," he said, referencing the comments made at the dinner with the League.

"Agreed, sir."

"Amir, do we have enough stores to outfit your wing for anti-capital ship strikes?"

Amir set his jaw. "Yes, sir. What we lack in numbers, we make up with fighting spirit. We have plenty of anti-ship missiles. I'll have our entire bomber force set up to engage capital ships, and we will stand by on ready five for your order to engage."

David nodded his understanding. "I hope I'm wrong, folks. I hope the *Destruction* simply stays in orbit, and this was all some kind of giant misunderstanding or a plot by only a few of the League's officers. But my gut says very

shortly our friends over there are going to go weapons hot and start shooting. So we're going to be prepared. Sheila, take us to material condition two, get our damage control teams up and running, and make sure those contractors know we're in a possible combat situation. I want the right groups in the right places to help with repairs should we need it."

Sheila spoke up. "I hope you're wrong too, sir."

"Let's get to it," David said with finality. The rest acknowledged him; Calvin and Amir left the bridge quickly. David and Sheila took their posts in the CO's and XO's chairs respectively. During the next couple of minutes, David closed his eyes and bowed his head in silent prayer. *God, I've never asked you for victory, but today, I ask you to give us peace if that is your will. Whatever happens, please spare the lives of those under my command and return them safely to their families.*

On the bridge of the *Destruction*, the ship was still running at battle stations. Seville could plainly see its crew was whispering about what was going on. He realized Barrigo had been discovered and stopped, or that the programming hadn't worked. *I'm not leaving empty handed. Not after all this time. Twenty-seven years ago, I lost my eye here. Today, they pay*. No League warship had been this close to Canaan since the aborted invasion nearly thirty years ago. He motioned toward Colonel Strappi, gesturing for him to come closer.

"Colonel, the plan has failed," Seville said bluntly.

"That's impossible. We just have to give it more time," Strappi trilled back, apparently unable to accept the idea that the State's plans failed.

Seville fought down his utter contempt for Strappi, staring at him for a moment. "Colonel, we have to adapt. We

are so close to the enemy…we haven't been this close in many years. We can strike fear into the hearts of their civilian population centers."

"But the State Security Committee—"

"Is not here, Colonel. Think of the medals that will be pinned on your chest by the chairman himself." Seville smiled thinly. "Let us be bold and decisive."

In truth, Seville had only given the ruse they had played a fifty percent chance of success to begin with; an orbital strike against the major population centers of Canaan had always been his backup plan.

Strappi cleared his throat. The man was nothing if not predictable; the idea of a medal from the chairman, well, that would always motivate the man. "Alright, Admiral, I'll go along. Show these religious fanatics that only the embrace of the League of Sol will save them."

Seville leaned back in his chair. Useful idiots like Strappi came in handy, at least until he had won the war against the Terran Coalition. Seville looked down toward his flag captain. "Captain Antonov, bring all of our weaponry online. Get a firing solution on the largest cities currently in range of our weapons."

Antonov looked up at Seville with something approaching sadness in his eyes. "Aye aye, Admiral."

As soon as the *Destruction* started powering up its weapons systems, the sensors onboard the *Lion of Judah* picked it up, and milliseconds later, Ruth saw it appear on her screens. "Conn, TAO. Aspect change, Master One." she announced. "Master One is powering its main weapons, sir."

David sat up just a little bit straighter in his chair. "Damn," he said under his breath toward Sheila, while he

punched a button on his console for 1MC. “General Quarters! General Quarters! This is the commanding officer. Man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations! Set material condition one throughout the ship. This is not a drill.” As he uttered the words, the general quarters alarm klaxon sounded throughout the vessel, and the lights on the bridge dimmed to a blue color.

“Conn, TAO! Aspect change, Master One. Master One is changing course and heading toward the capital.”

David sucked in his breath. “Navigation, put us between Master One and Canaan. TAO, bring all weapons online, and charge the energy weapon capacitor. Raise shields and activate the automated point defense system.”

Hammond deftly maneuvered the *Lion of Judah* between the *Destruction* and the planet, making use of the superior sub-light engines on the *Lion* and her tactical thruster system. “Conn, navigation. Holding steady on course two, one, six. Master One is directly off our starboard quarter.”

David could see Ruth carrying out her orders as the tactical readout above his head showed the shields going up, and various weapons systems coming online.

Sheila leaned over David’s shoulder and quietly asked, “Sir, shouldn’t we ask for instructions from command?”

“No time, XO. Besides, Barton is the commander of the home defense fleet.”

She scrunched her nose in response. “Point taken.”

“Conn, TAO! Aspect change, Master One. Master One has locked its weapons onto us and has completed charging its weapons.”

At this point, the *Destruction* could fire on the *Lion* at any time. David looked toward Taylor. “Communications, signal the *Destruction*, warn them off.”

A couple of seconds passed before Taylor responded, “No response, sir.”

So this is it. A fake peace deal, the Trojan horse defeated, and now the League will try to kill as many as they can before they run away. David paused for just a moment. He knew that there would be many that would try to hang the debacle on him, but more importantly, on his crew. He also knew what had to be done; the *Destruction* could not be allowed to fire on Canaan, and it couldn't be allowed to leave the system with the information it had undoubtedly gleaned from sensor sweeps. Still, he didn't want to fire the first shot, and he figured that Seville was hoping he would get a propaganda coup against the Terran Coalition. He looked to Ruth next. "TAO, firing point procedures, Master One, all forward mag-cannons and neutron beam emitters," he stated as formally as possible.

"Aye, sir, firing solution set," Ruth responded automatically as her training took over; her hands betrayed her nerves as they shook for a moment.

The second-guessing by David ended a few seconds later. "Conn, TAO! Aspect change, Master One! Master One has opened fire!" Ruth nearly shouted, and a moment later, the ship rocked slightly as weapons fire slammed into the *Lion* from the League dreadnought. "Shield's holding, sir!" Ruth announced after reviewing the status displays on her console.

David leaned forward in his chair. "TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons, Master One."

Weapons fire erupted from the *Lion*'s forward and aft magnetic-cannon turrets, and at the close range, there were no misses. The *Destruction*'s shields flared, absorbing the hits, which were followed up by attacks from the *Lion*'s secondary weapons system, its neutron cannon emitters, which fired directed energy pulses.

"Conn, TAO. Multiple clean hits on Master One. Master One shields are holding." As Ruth spoke, the ship buckled

again as incoming weapons fire hit it. “Conn, TAO. Aspect change, Master Two! It’s powering up its engines and charging its Lawrence drive.”

David’s head snapped around; with the transport attempting to jump out, he would have to disable it to give the Marines time to board the ship and secure it. “TAO, firing point procedures, Master Two! Target its engines only with the neutron cannons. Disabling shots only, TAO.” The overwhelming stress of a combat situation in point blank range of Canaan was getting to him, and everyone else on the bridge.

“Aye aye, sir, firing solution set.”

“TAO, match bearings, shoot, neutron cannons, Master Two.”

Blue beams of energy darted out from the *Lion* once again, stabbing into the League POW transport; they cut through the shields and hull of the ship like a hot knife through butter, neatly slicing off the engine exhausts and manifolds. The League transport was effectively unable to further maneuver in space.

“Conn, TAO, Master Two disabled,” Ruth said, exhaling sharply.

“TAO, firing point procedures, Master One, Magnetic cannons and neutron beams,” David said, resuming the attack on the *Destruction*.

As Ruth made the necessary calculations, David looked toward Taylor. “Communications, signal Colonel Demood… he is ordered to release the breaching pods and secure Master Two by any means necessary. Alert command that we’ve engaged the enemy and request reinforcements.”

31

Calvin stood next to his second-in-command, Major Raul Cabello, reviewing a 3D projected schematic of the League Transport that contained the POWs. “This just looks gnarly, Cabello,” he pointed to the areas of the ship they had no intelligence on. “How many Force Recon Marines do we have on this tub?”

Since Force Recon was considered Special Operations Capable forces, they were the most trained and best equipped Marines onboard the *Lion of Judah*. Under normal conditions, the MEU would have a company of actual special forces operators attached, but the *Lion* only had three hundred out of three thousand Marines currently embarked. Thankfully, of three companies attached, one was a light company of Force Recon Marines.

Cabello looked up from the schematic and spoke, thick with a Spanish accent, “Forty, Colonel. I’ve ordered them all to suit up and prepare for VBSS.” VBSS was what the Marines called “Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure.” “We can breach one team of twenty on the port side of the ship and the rest on the starboard side to split the defense security teams inside the ship. After that, we have the rest of our two hundred and sixty combat Marines board and secure the

areas the spearheads take." Two bright dots began to glow on the schematic, indicating where Cabello planned to insert TCMC forces.

Calvin nodded. "Looks good to me. What about EOD?" he asked, referring to Explosive Ordnance Disposal. "We didn't get our team on before the ship launched, and I'd wager we'll see some booby traps over there."

"Well..." Cabello said. "We have a volunteer."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "A volunteer?"

"I think I'll let him speak for himself." He motioned to a Marine sergeant standing near the hatch to the passageway. "Sergeant, bring Mr. Uzun in."

The sergeant motioned to someone in the passageway from Calvin's perspective, and a few moments later, an older man in civilian clothing walked into the room and strode over to Cabello and Calvin. "Gunnery Sergeant Hadi Uzun, reporting for duty, Colonel," the man said crisply in accented English.

Calvin couldn't quite place the accent. As he looked the man over, he appeared to be in good shape, wearing an engineering technician's jumpsuit and work belt. "You're out of uniform, Gunny," he said with a trace of a smile.

"I've been out of uniform for eight years, Colonel. But I spent fifteen years in the Marines specializing in explosive device disposal," Uzun said, looking Calvin in the eyes. "I'm onboard as a member of the contractor team. I overheard some of your Marines talking about needing an EOD tech as I was checking a power relay. If you'll have me, I'm your man."

"Colonel, I took the liberty of pulling Mr. Uzun's service jacket. He was honorably discharged for medical reasons and has high performance rankings during his time as an EOD technician."

Calvin looked at Cabello. “I can’t allow a civilian to join a boarding op against a League POW transport, Major. Good Lord, how many regs does that break?”

Uzun cleared his throat. “Colonel…once a Marine, always a Marine.”

Calvin glanced back to Uzun; he could tell Cabello backed putting the man onboard, and he knew they desperately needed someone that could disarm League booby traps and the onboard self-destruct system. “Damn right, Gunny. Get in uniform and get a bomb suit. We’re dusting off as soon as the bridge gives the order.”

A change seemed to come over Uzun; he stood just a little bit taller and a little bit straighter. “Sir, yes sir! Semper fi!” he said to Calvin, and then turned on his heel to leave.

At that moment, a corporal rushed up to Calvin and Cabello. “Sirs, Colonel Cohen has requested that the rescue operation begin immediately.”

Calvin looked toward Cabello. “Get those boys in the breaching pods, Cabello. I will take team A, you take team B. Corporal, please relay to the bridge that we will be ready to launch momentarily.”

“Conn, TAO! Master One’s aft shielding is close to collapse, sir,” Ruth announced.

“TAO, firing point procedures, forward vertical launch array. Target eight Hunter missiles on Master One’s aft section, make tubes one through eight ready in all respects,” David said, deciding to use the precious Hunter missiles his ship carried. Hunters carried advanced artificial intelligence and could evade all but the absolute best League point defense systems; in this combat, the League battleship lacked its escorts and the overlapping point defense coverage

they carried. He wanted to end the battle quickly and disable the *Destruction*.

"Aye aye, sir, firing solution set for eight Hunter missiles on Master One. Tubes one through eight ready in all respects."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, tubes one through eight, Master One," David said.

Ruth pressed the launch button on her console, and eight Hunter missiles thundered into space from the *Lion*'s forward vertical launch array; a missile cell that popped out of ship's superstructure and could retract to be reloaded fully in less than an hour. The array held one hundred and twenty missiles in total, of which forty were Hunters and the rest less sophisticated, but still powerful LIDAR tracking variants called Starbolt missiles.

"Conn, TAO. All missiles running hot, straight and normal sir."

The Hunters went active a thousand meters from the *Lion* and quickly linked with the *Lion*'s tactical network, locking on to the *Destruction*. Evading enemy point defense weaponry, they plunged into the weakened aft shield. Out of the eight, six hit their target and two were destroyed by point defense; the shielding on the aft of the *Destruction* flared violently and winked out.

"Conn, TAO. Master One's aft shield has collapsed."

David began to form the words to order Ruth to capitalize on this development and pound the *Destruction*'s aft quadrant with mag-cannon and neutron beam fire, but before he could, Taylor interrupted him. "Conn, communications! General Barton is demanding to speak to you, sir."

David just groaned inwardly. *Of all the times, I have to deal with Barton now?* "Put it on my viewer, Lieutenant," David said rather matter-of-factly.

Barton's face popped onto the viewer that hung from the ceiling above David's chair. "Colonel! What are you doing? I show sustained weapons fire between you and the peace convoy!"

David fought to keep his neutral expression. "General, sir, we discovered a League saboteur onboard the *Lion*. She has been apprehended, but the *Destruction* opened fire on us after —"

"You are supposed to be securing peace in our time, Colonel! Not starting another war! Stand down now! The *Ark Royal* will deal with this!"

David glanced at Sheila out of the corner of his eye. "General, we can't stand down. If we disengage, the *Destruction* will be free to fire on Canaan."

While Barton was yelling, Sheila made a gesture across her throat to Taylor, indicating for him to cut the line.

"Colonel, I said—" The screen blinked out mid-sentence.

David cranked his head over to Taylor, who shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir, General's Barton's signal seems to dropped. Should I try to get him back?"

Sheila smirked despite herself. "I don't think we have time for him right now, sir," she said with a trace of mirth in her voice.

"I concur, XO. TAO, firing point procedures—"

"Conn, TAO! Aspect change, Master One! Master One is powering up her Lawrence drive!"

David quickly adjusted his tactics. "Navigation, match course and speed, Master One. TAO, drain the energy weapons capacitor. Navigation, charge the Lawrence drive!"

Sheila glanced at David. "Sir, are we going to pursue them?" She looked somewhat doubtful of the strategy.

"Of course we are, XO. We've got to. They've been inside Canaan's defense parameter and beyond that. This is a

massive propaganda victory for the League. We've got to neutralize that ship."

"Yes, sir."

He could tell from her tone that she wasn't completely sold on the idea, but David's gut was almost always right. *Besides, I'd really like to take down a League dreadnought in our first combat. If nothing else, that'll help morale on the home front.*

"Communications, Conn. Colonel Demood reports that they are ready to begin the rescue operation on Master Two."

David felt relief at the news; they could pursue the *Destruction* without leaving the POWs behind. "Communications, patch me through to Colonel Demood."

A moment later, Taylor said, "Sir, Colonel Demood is patched into your console."

David glanced down and spoke into the mic. "Demood, this is Cohen. Bring them home. Godspeed, and good luck."

Calvin's voice crackled through the speaker. "Godspeed Colonel, Demood out."

"Conn, TAO! Master One has successfully opened a wormhole."

David snapped his head up. "Navigation, all ahead flank. Follow Master One through that wormhole. TAO, stand by to immediately reacquire Master One upon transit."

There was a chorus of "Yes, sirs," followed by action on the part of Ruth and Hammond; David stared at his tactical plot as the *Destruction* disappeared from their screens. The two breaching pods from the *Lion* launched, followed by several large shuttlecraft headed directly for the transport; with that, the *Lion* was ready to pursue the fleeing enemy ship. The *Lion*'s engines rapidly accelerated and the ship flew through the void, following into the wormhole generated by the *Destruction* before the wormhole's vortex collapsed in a dazzling array of colors.

32

THE *LION of Judah* emerged from the wormhole close on the trail of the *Destruction*. In the seconds it took for sensors to snap back on and the ships to recover from the stress of wormhole transition, the bridge crews of both ships steeled themselves to reenter the fight. On the bridge of the *Destruction*, Admiral Seville watched Colonel Strappi pace the floor of the bridge. Fighting the urge to sneer at the man, he counted down the seconds in his head until the ship's sensors snapped back online.

"Communications, signal our reinforcements to transit to our coordinates now," Seville commanded.

A moment later, the communications officer looked up from his station. "Admiral, message received and confirmed. They will jump in momentarily."

Strappi walked over to Seville and leaned close. "Admiral, what reinforcements?" he asked, bewildered.

Seville smiled thinly at his political officer. "I had a small squadron of my best ships waiting just in case we needed them. I had expected to see the pride of the Coalition fleet, the *Ark Royal*, pursuing us, but they'll do against this new ship just the same."

“How did you get this past the Social and Public Safety Committee, Admiral?” Strappi asked, the tone of his voice indicating a level of respect and fear.

“Because not everything in the League goes through the bloody Social and Public Safety Committee,” Seville said, derision dripping from his voice like acid. “There was a contingency plan in place if we needed it. Turns out we did.”

The tactical officer broke into the conversation with an announcement. “Admiral, we have eight wormholes opening; our reinforcements have arrived.”

Seville smiled. “Checkmate.”

On the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*, David had been counting down the seconds until his ship could see again, ready to finish the fight against the League warship.

“Conn, TAO! LIDAR array online…” Ruth’s voice shot up an octave. “I’m showing nine contacts, sir!”

“Confirm that, TAO! What are the ship classes of those contacts?” David barked. Sheila stared in alarm.

“Conn, TAO. I show one Behemoth class Dreadnaught, designation Master One…four Rand class cruisers designated Master Two through Five…and four Lancer class frigates designated Master Six through Nine. Sir, the Rands have fighter craft detaching from them. I’m reading some kind of rail launch system.”

Rail launch system for fighters, what the heck? David had read about a contraption like that in intelligence reports concerning the very top tier of League ships and elite crews but had never engaged one in combat. He quickly realized that this battle group was designed to engage a fleet carrier without her escorts. But perhaps not a battleship of the *Lion*’s design. Stopping himself from overthinking the

tactics, he concentrated on the situation at hand. He had to solve one problem at a time and prevent the enemy from getting inside of his OODA loop. "TAO, do you have a read on how many fighters we're facing and what types?"

"Sir, I estimate at least fifty League fighters. They're too far out to identify fully, but at least some appear to be larger bombers."

"Conn, TAO! Aspect change, all contacts. They are moving to engagement range, sir. Master One through Five are standing off, while Master Six through Nine are maneuvering to cover our fighter bays with point defense fire."

David punched up his tactical plot on the viewer directly in front of his command station. It was clear that the League fleet intended to prevent him from launching fighters, while they overwhelmed the defenses of the *Lion*. He quickly decided that the only course of action was to disable the frigates and scramble the *Lion*'s fighter wing to engage the League fighters and capital ships.

"TAO, firing point procedures. Load high-explosive shells into the mag-cannons. Target Master Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine with mag-cannons and neutron beams."

"Aye aye, sir, weapons loaded, firing solutions set."

"TAO, shoot, all weapons," David said, a hard edge to his voice.

Magnetic cannon rounds shot out from the *Lion*, striking the shields of all four League frigates. As the high-explosive rounds impacted, causing extensive energy drain, neutron beam fire raked over the frigates. The shields of the two closest frigates failed, and they exploded as multiple impacts slammed into their weak and brittle hulls.

"Conn, TAO. Master Six and Eight destroyed, Master Nine neutralized, Master Seven is continuing on course," Ruth said.

“TAO, spin up automated point defense, set a perimeter around the ship so our fighters can launch.”

“Conn, TAO. Automated Point Defense engaged. We have a perimeter of twenty thousand kilometers.”

David reassessed his tactical plot. “Communications, get me Colonel Amir.”

Taylor cued up Amir’s personal command channel. “He’s patched in to your station, sir.”

David spoke into the mic. “Amir, I need you to launch your wing and engage the League fighters and capital ships. I want to engage the Rands and degrade them enough so we can close in and finish this.”

Amir’s voice came through strong in reply. “Understood, Colonel. The Reapers are standing by to launch. We are armed up for interdiction and capital ship engagement.”

David glanced down at the mic as he spoke into it. “Good hunting and Godspeed, Colonel.”

“*Inshallah*.”

Amir was in the middle of running his final pre-flight check when David ordered the launch of the wing. Once completed, he cued the pre-set communications channel to his second in command, Major Rebecca Tulleny. “Ready to go?” he asked informally.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I was hoping this peace deal was the real thing.” Sadness filled her voice.

“We’ve got a job to do, Major. Let’s get out of here and kick them back to Earth,” Amir replied. Truthfully, he hated the League with a passion. He considered fighting them to be a form of Jihad, and he was glad to give his life fighting them if that was what it took.

In times like this, Amir simply saw red and wanted to blow as many League craft and pilots out of space as he could. When the rage subsided, he would repent and ask Allah to forgive him, but for now, he was still mad as hell.

Amir switched his commlink to the Air Bosses' line. "Boss, we're ready to go. Request permission to launch."

"This is the boss. Colonel, all squadrons are cleared to launch in order, Reapers first. Godspeed."

Amir then flipped his commlink to reach his squadron commanders. "Attention, we are cleared for launch. Stand by to launch as called by the boss... Reapers are launching first. Once we're in space, form up and stand by for further orders."

Amir looked down at his console and pressed the button to launch. He was always the first in space; there was no feeling like the thrill of launching at full speed out of the side of a hangar into the blackness of the void. It never got old; he could never see himself doing anything else. Pressed back into his seat from the extreme G forces, mitigated though they were by the design of his pilot's chair and the inertial dampening systems of his craft, the fighter thundered into space. In the few minutes it took for the roughly fifty fighters carried on the *Lion* to launch, he studied the sensor readouts of the approaching League craft as they did.

As the last of his wing thundered into space, Amir cued his commlink to a private channel. "Reaper One to Tiger One."

"Go ahead, sir," Tulleny said.

"I want your squadron to form up with our bombers and provide close escort. I and the rest of Reapers will engage the incoming bombers."

"Understood, Colonel. Godspeed."

"*Inshallah*."

Amir pulled up his HUD and spent some time pondering the best attack approach. While the League craft did outnumber them almost two to one, he felt confident in the training of his pilots and in the quality of their combat spacecraft compared to the League's. CDF technology was always a few steps ahead of the League, and League training had nothing on the Coalition. Fifteen seconds out from maximum engagement range, he cued the commlink to reach his entire squadron.

"Reapers, this is Reaper One. There's a layer of League fighters screening their bombers. We'll take one shot at the fighters with guided missiles as we pass, but our objective is to knock down as many bombers as possible. Weapons status free!"

On his HUD, the entire squadron signaled its understanding, which translated into green dots next to each pilot's name and craft. As his fighter entered max range, Amir locked on to a League fighter; it took several seconds for him to hear the lock-on sound, or what the pilots called tone. "Reaper One, Fox Three," he called out as he fired an active LIDAR tracked missile. There were other calls of Fox Three from his squadron, as every fighter lined up and fired on a League craft. Simultaneously, the League fighters fired their own missiles at the wave of CDF fighters.

With some level of surprise, Amir watched his HUD as most of the missiles fired by his fighters were evaded by the League craft; only two hit their intended targets, and of those, only one was a hard kill. Blasting through the League formation, he turned his attention to lining up and engaging the lumbering League bombers.

Sliding in behind one of the multi-crewed craft, Amir pulled up his miniature neutron cannons and fired on the bomber in front of him. "Reaper One, guns, guns, guns."

It took several seconds of sustained fire and multiple hits from his neutron cannons before the League bomber finally exploded. “Reaper One, splash one. Splash one bandit!”

The missile warning light and tone suddenly sounded in Amir’s cockpit. He realized that while he was engaging the bomber, two League fighters had gotten onto his six. In the time it took him to locate the League fighters, he had two missiles inbound on his craft. While part of his brain basically wondered where the League had gotten what appeared to be an entire squadron of elite pilots, his training had simply snapped in and took over as he responded to the threat.

Noting that both incoming missiles were classified as heat-seeking by the onboard tactical computer, Amir triggered his flare launchers, sending dozens of bright, white-hot energy signature generators, which would have the effect of confusing the incoming missiles. One missile quickly veered off, taking the bait and exploding. The other stayed on target, tracking him move for move

Amir reinforced his aft shielding and pulled up hard on the flight stick after deploying more flares; the final missile exploded far too close for comfort, sending his fighter spinning and tumbling.

In the several seconds it took Amir to get his fighter back under control, his wingman reported in. “Reaper Two to Reaper One, you’ve still got three bandits on your six. I’m moving to engage the bandit closest to me now, over.”

Glancing at the 3D battle map on his HUD, Amir could see his wingman closing in on the League fighter that was furthest away from him. That left two deadly interceptors in his blind spot trying to lock on for a shot. He adjusted himself in his flight chair as the missile warning light came on again; this time, he pulled the stick down hard and increased the thrust to maximum. The Gs he pulled were so

high that he approached black out. But his gamble paid off; he found himself hurtling toward the enemy fighters and blew past them so fast that neither he or the enemy could obtain a lock.

Looping back around, Amir pushed his fighter to its maximum limits and took advantage of momentary disorientation by the League pilots. He settled in behind one of the craft that fired a missile at him, triggering his target acquisition system. “Reaper One, Fox Three!” he said as the LIDAR guided missile leapt from its launching bay on his fighter and roared after the League craft. After successfully tracking the League fighter for several seconds, the missile connected and blew it to bits.

Not wanting to take the time to obtain another weapons lock, Amir opted to use a heat-seeking missile on the next target. Pulling up the weapons selector on his HUD, he mentally selected the warhead and launched it in the direction of the remaining League fighter. Taking a moment to check in on the progress of his squadrons, he noted that the bombers and their escorting fighters had made it through the furball that was ongoing and were heading toward the League capital ships.

Losses seemed to be higher than normal for an engagement of this type, leading Amir to conclude he was seeing elite pilots and perhaps elite machines. That determination would be for later, though, as the second fighter he had targeted was hit by the missile and destroyed. Before he could call out the two kills, his wingman announced killing the third League fighter. “Reaper Two, Splash one. Splash one bandit!”

Cueing the communications channel, Amir called out, “Reaper One, Splash two. Splash two!”

Hotdogging just a little bit, Amir then performed a barrel roll in his fighter while saying “*Allahu Akbar*,” an Arabic

saying for "God is Great." He then picked the nearest bomber and closed in to engage. *God willing, my squadron will finish off the enemy.*

DAVID HELD on tightly to the arms of his station as the bridge rocked from weapon impacts on the shielding system of the *Lion*. Glancing at the tactical plot on his station, he observed that the League ships had formed a tight sphere providing overlapping fire support, making it difficult for the *Lion* to pick one off to even the odds.

"Conn, TAO. Forward shield emitter's effectiveness is decreasing, sir."

David decided to gamble and try to take out one of the Rands. "Navigation, all ahead full, intercept course on Master Three." That specific Rand was just slightly out of position from David's read. "TAO, firing point procedures, Master Three. Mag-cannons and neutron beams."

"Conn, TAO. Firing solutions set on Master Three."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons."

Magnetic cannon shells raced out from the *Lion of Judah* at thirty percent of the speed of light toward the League formation. Most impacted upon the shields of the targeted Rand, weakening said shields dramatically. The neutron beam strikes inflicted damage on the hull plating of the Rand, but not enough to disable it. While the *Lion*'s weapons recharged, the Rand shifted formation, falling back to the other side of the sphere formation while another ship covered her. However, the League ships were free to continue to pour weapons fire onto the *Lion*.

"Conn, TAO! Master Three has disengaged after receiving moderate damage, sir."

As Ruth spoke, weapon impacts slammed into the *Lion* from the three Rand's remaining in line of sight, in addition to the *Destruction*. "Conn, TAO. Forward shield collapse is imminent, sir."

"Damnit," David said under his breath, drawing a look from Sheila. "Navigation, left thirty degrees, turn our forward shield out of the enemies firing arc, and present our port shield quadrant."

Hammond responded, "Aye aye, sir, left thirty degrees!" as weapons fire continued to rake the *Lion*.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master Two. Magnetic cannons and neutron beams…let's keep them guessing."

"Aye, sir, firing solutions set."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons."

As another round of weapons fire erupted from the *Lion*, more incoming plasma bolts slammed into the *Lion*'s forward quadrant. Plasma bolts peppered the hull of the ship, causing limited damage through the ablative armor.

"Conn, TAO! Forward shield has collapsed, sir!"

David looked toward Hammond. "Navigation, maximum turn!" he barked.

"Conn, navigation. Acknowledged, sir. We're moving as fast as she can. Another seven seconds before we've got our forward shield out of their firing lane."

As Hammond spoke, a strong shock was felt by David and the rest of the bridge crew, lurching the ship forward. Several seconds later, the speaker on David's station sprang to life. "Engineering, Conn. This is Major Hanson. We're showing a fire in the forward ammunition magazine."

David's jaw dropped. "Say again, engineering?"

"Fire in the forward ammunition magazine, sir. Recommend we vent it into space to avoid further casualty to the ship."

"Engineering, vent the forward ammunition magazine."

A few moments passed and there was a pregnant pause on the line. “Sir, venting controls are inoperative,” Hanson reported. David looked at Sheila, thinking that this new development could be a disaster. If the magnetic cannon rounds or missiles began to cook off or explode, it would destroy the ship from the inside out. Clearly lacking a shakedown cruise before being put into use, the *Lion* was going to suffer from a lot of small glitches. It was just that this one had an outsized effect on the ship.

“Engineering, get as many damage control teams as we can to the magazine.” David spoke into the mic and then glanced at Sheila. “XO, get down there and put that fire out by any means necessary. Hanson, the XO is going to take local command of the damage control teams,” David said into the mic rapidly.

“Aye, sir, engineering out.”

Sheila stood. “Don’t get this ship shot out from under us during your first combat in it, sir,” she said with a smile.

“Godspeed,” David said, glancing at her briefly as she walked away from the command station.

33

In orbit of Canaan, the ominous black mass of the League Type-D cargo ship grew larger by the second as the breaching pod careened toward it. Calvin sat in the co-pilot's chair onboard next to the warrant officer that flew the pod. He watched the distance closing rapidly and glanced over at the pilot.

"Ever done this before, Bradshaw?" he asked.

"No, sir," the young woman replied, tight-lipped. "I don't think any of us have boarded a POW transport over Canaan before, sir."

Calvin snickered. "How about *any* ships, Warrant?"

"Yes, sir, just a few times."

"Well, try not to rock us so hard we throw up," Calvin retorted, smiling.

"What's the matter, Colonel, age catching up with you?" she asked with a grin.

"What is it with all the wiseasses on this ship?" Calvin said with mock annoyance.

Instantly, the pilot was all business. "All right, sir, this is where it gets bumpy. About ten seconds out from hard dock." She keyed the intercom for the pod. "Brace! Brace! Brace! Prepare for impact, Marines!"

Calvin took heed and braced himself as best as he could in the co-pilot's chair. As the seconds ticked down, he found himself saying a prayer. *God, I know I'm probably the last person you want to hear from, seeing as my job is to go out and kill people. Please help me and my men to save these POWs. Something good can still come of this, and I need your help to make it happen. Amen.*

There was a loud bang and a hard impact as the pod slammed into the side of the League transport. "Okay, we're locked on," the pilot said.

Calvin stood up from his seat. "Prepare to breach the ship, Warrant." Cueing the internal commlink in his power armor, he keyed the channel for Cabello. "Major, what's your status?"

Cabello's accented voice came through. "About to breach."

"Breach on my mark."

Stepping back into the cargo area, his twenty Force Recon Marines, along with the EOD technician Hadi Uzun, stood ready. Their weapons pointed at the aft door, waiting for it to open. Calvin glanced over at the awaiting team. "I'm not much on the big inspirational speech crap. I'm a Marine. I've always been a Marine, and Marines do not leave our own behind!" He finished the final line with a shout.

The twenty-one Marines responded with one voice, "Hoorah!"

"We will defeat the enemy! Regardless of their number! We do this or we don't leave this ship. Do you get me, Marines?"

"Yes, sir!" the squad responded, loud and clear.

"Then get in there and kill those Leaguer bastards! Bradshaw, breach now!" Calvin cued his commlink. "Cabello, breach!"

A moment later, the aft door blew outward, and a couple of dazed League security officers raised their weapons to open fire. Before they could get off a shot, the lead Marines fired sub-sonic but highly lethal rounds from their M-35 combat rifles and both officers dropped dead. Calvin had ordered non-lethal rounds to be carried, in case the team got into a firefight with POWs in the line of fire, but otherwise, they were to use lethal ammunition designed specifically for space boarding actions.

"Squad one, move out! Squad two, cover our rear!" Calvin said, walking out of the pod with the rest of the Marines.

They divided into two squads of ten; one moved forward with Calvin in the middle. Pulling up the limited schematics of the ship in his HUD, he ordered his Marines forward toward what he thought were the engineering spaces. Cabello would first gain control of the shuttle bay and start landing additional combat Marines to help mop up. A few meters down the passageway, a group of several League security officers came around a corner and opened fire. The Marines engaged almost immediately, cutting down the League troops with ease. One of his Marines took a round in his chest armor with no loss of combat effectiveness. The EOD tech, per his orders, stayed with the rear guard. Calvin was unwilling to take any chances with him, regardless of his ability to handle himself in a firefight.

It took them a few minutes, but the Leaguers finally began to respond in force to the TCMC attack. "Colonel," Cabello's voice said through the commlink. "We're encountering heavy resistance in the shuttle bay. They're throwing everything they've got at us."

"More than you can handle?"

"Never."

"Let me know when you've got control of the area. This ship's big and we need more support."

“Yes, sir!”

The point man for the squad rounded a corner and was immediately greeted by sustained weapons fire. Calvin and a few other Marines were right behind him and ran into a buzzsaw; the Leaguers had set up an anti-vehicle weapon in the passageway and were using it on his troops. The point man collapsed as he took several rounds to his chest.

Calvin’s Marines made themselves as small as they could and returned fire down the passageway, killing some of the enemy combatants but failing to silence the heavy weapons fire. He grabbed the Marine that carried the squad automatic weapon. “Corporal, you got armor-piercing rounds?” he asked over the din of battle.

“Yes, sir! Locked and loaded, sir!”

“Follow me!”

Taking the corporal and another Marine down a side passageway, Calvin walked the distance to where he thought the checkpoint was located on the other side of the wall. “Okay, Corporal, fire through the wall and take down that strongpoint.”

The corporal raised his weapon and fired on full auto for ten seconds, rounds spraying forth and stitching up and down the wall. A few seconds later, Calvin’s comm chirped. “Sir, not sure what you did, but those Leaguers just got hosed. We’ve cleared the area and are ready to breach the engineering space.”

Calvin and the two Marines with him made their way back to the main group that stood outside of a large bulkhead door for the engineering space. Stepping over fallen League soldiers, he stopped to take the dog tags of the Marine that had fallen earlier. Later, they would retrieve his body for burial. Walking up to the door, he looked at the Marines to his right and to his left. “Okay, boys, let’s blow this door,

take over the engineering room, and go the hell home," he said in his best hard-ass Marine voice.

With a nod from Calvin, one of the Marines triggered a breaching charge, blowing the bulkhead door backward in a shaped explosion. The rest charged through the opening into a firestorm of rounds from League soldiers. A couple went down, but the power-armored Marines had superior protection and firepower; they quickly cut through most of the resistance and fanned out through the engineering core. Most of the engineering personnel surrendered, but a few snatched up weapons from the fallen League security troops and tried to keep fighting.

Calvin put a trio of rounds into an engineer that jumped up in front of him, but not before the man fired a burst of bullets into his armor. Looking to his right, he grunted, "Gotta give these guys credit; what they lack in ability, they make up for with guts." The corporal that was covering his flank smirked inside of his suit.

"Well, if you know your family will be killed if you surrender, it must be a driving factor."

Calvin grunted again. "Good point, Corporal."

As he reached the main rector housing, he took note of a couple of Goliaths; League Marines in their version of power armor. They were crouched around a technician who was frantically working on a console. Bringing up his arm in the signal for "Stop," the corporal and another Marine behind him froze.

Calvin made the hand signals to engage the Leaguers and took up a firing position. Like a well-oiled machine, the friendlies with him took up flanking positions stealthily. On his signal, they opened fire; unlike the other League troops, the Goliath suits soaked up repeated hits from the Marines' rifles. The League Marines dove behind cover and returned

fire, with a lucky shot catching the corporal to Calvin's right in the helmet, killing him instantly.

Son of a bitch! He yanked a high-explosive grenade off his belt and pulled the pin, tossing it at the nearest Goliath. The explosion momentarily blinded Calvin, and the Leaguer tried to move but was clearly wounded. Calvin pumped rounds into his back until he stopped moving and lay still on the ground. Another enemy popped up from cover and opened fire on Calvin, hitting him repeatedly. The wind knocked out of his chest, he fell backwards, firing blindly as he went. After a moment, the incoming fire ceased.

Calvin caught his breath and stuck his head up, seeing the other League Marine lying motionless on the ground with blood flowing out of his helmet. *Wow, there really is a God.* Calvin stood and advanced on the League technician. "Step away from that console and show me your hands! Now!" Calvin shouted.

The technician looked up with a snarl, and Calvin's finger rested on the trigger to his rifle. He didn't want to shoot an unarmed man. "Screw you, zealot!" the man shouted as he simultaneously brought his hand down on a computer screen. A split second later, Calvin pulled the trigger, sending three rounds into the man, center mass.

He collapsed in a heap as Calvin advanced and looked down at the screen. The words "Self-Destruct Enabled—05:00" in red stared back at him. It took him a moment to notice that the numbers were counting down. He keyed his mic. "Get Uzun over here. We've got a problem!"

SHEILA ROUNDED the corner and came upon a couple of dozen soldiers in fire-retardant suits, lugging hoses and fire-extinguishing equipment. "Report, Master Chief!"

“About to breach, XO. Get your hood on!” the tough old master chief said.

He looks like he was he born in the CDF. “No time. I’m here to coordinate anyway.”

“Stay back then. I expect some flashing.”

Maybe this wasn’t the best idea. It’s been a decade since I did damage control, and a fire spreading over our heads isn’t my idea of fun. She’d briefly considered putting on a zero-G suit but decided against it as time was of the essence. In the old days, crews had to contend with zero-G fires, which behaved strangely compared to a fire in gravity. Thankfully, artificial gravity generators had solved the problem a century ago for the Terrans.

“Understood, Master Chief. Breach that hatch and let’s get this fire out.”

Smoke wafted out of the edges of the hatch, giving some indication to the seriousness of the situation. Sheila fell back to the rear of the formation of firefighters as the master chief dogged the hatch open. Flames shot out of the entryway, engulfing a fireman in flames. The team was quick to hose him down in CO_2, his protective suit doing its job. She hung back for a few seconds before entering at the rear of the team. What she saw shocked her. Massive plumes of flames shot through the large bay; the fire was clearly out of control.

“Master Chief! Clear the way to the controls for fire suppression system! That’s our best solution.”

“Yes, ma’am! Corporal, put down a wave of foam. Mathews, check those controls!”

For a few frantic minutes, the team sprayed CO_2 foam and slowly beat back the flames. Upon reaching the manual controls, the private detailed to the task started his work.

“We got a problem here,” he screamed above the din of firefighting efforts. “The keypad isn’t functioning!”

“Cover me, Master Chief,” Sheila said, picking her way through the path of twisted metal and slippery deck plating. Sliding in next to the young private, she rechecked his diagnosis. *Damnit, this is what we get for not having a real shakedown cruise.* “Okay, plan B. Get a crewman down here in a zero-G suit and we’ll manually open the space to vacuum.”

“Away zero-G damage control party, emergency!” the Master Chief said through his commlink.

“Acknowledged!” another voice called back that Sheila didn’t recognize.

“It’ll take them five to ten minutes to get here, XO.”

“Spread the team out and keep the flames beaten down,” Sheila said as she continued to try and get a response out of the keypad, even resorting to hitting the stubborn piece of technology.

A shout from halfway across the magazine attracted her attention. Glancing up, she saw a warhead fall off its protective rack as the metal alloys began to melt. *My God, if one of those cooks off, it’ll destroy the ship from the inside!*

“Master Chief! That rack of shells is melting! Get CO_2 on it now!” Sheila yelled.

The team was already on it; three soldiers lined up, spraying foam out of large hose nozzles. While successful, she realized that the racks on either side of the one that failed were bending forward—clearly about to fail.

Mathews lifted his head up from the underbelly of the console, his jaw dropping open. “Oh Jesus.”

One after another, warheads spilled off the racks, crashing to the deck. A feeling of panic was palpable as it threatened to engulf the team. “We’d better pull back,” Sheila said quietly.

“I got this, XO,” Mathews said, standing and taking off as fast as possible in the smoke and flame toward the manual venting controls; they were located next to a pair of doors

that opened directly to space and were used to reload the magazine while in dock.

He almost made it.

A beam that crisscrossed the upper reaches of the space, responsible for holding up several sections of catwalk, broke free and crashed to the deck. Mathews was directly in its path and went down hard, crushed under its weight.

Time almost stopped for Sheila as she took in the scene and realized that her path to safety was now blocked by debris.

"XO, hang tight! We'll get you out!" the old master chief yelled from the other side.

What she had to do was suddenly crystal clear to Sheila. "Negative, Master Chief. Pull the team out."

"Say again, ma'am?"

"I said pull the team out. I'll vent the space manually."

"You don't have a suit, ma'am."

For more than a moment, Sheila considered allowing them to get her out*. If I do that, I'll cause incredible risk to the ship, not to mention all these soldiers. I can't do it.* "I know. No time. Now get these soldiers to safety and close the hatch behind you. That's an order, Master Chief."

Sheila couldn't see the man for the flames and smoke, but the sadness in his voice was impossible to miss. "Yes, ma'am."

"You heard the XO! Clear the space! Move it!"

The sounds of foam being sprayed echoed through the magazine, before the loud clank of the hatch closing left her alone. Sheila made her way across the fallen catwalk to the manual control panel. Ripping off the cover, she was confronted by a yellow lever marked "Danger."

"Godspeed, XO," the voice of the master chief said through her commlink.

“Thanks, Master Chief. I’ll see you on the flip side,” she said with false bravado.

Sheila pulled on the lever with all her might; it didn’t move. Picking up a fallen piece of pipe, she used it as a lever, wedging it into the area between the lever and the back of the panel. Slowly and almost imperceptibly at first, it began to move. Yellow warning lights flashed, and a klaxon sounded, indicating imminent exposure to vacuum. *Of course I forgot my safety harness.* She looked around wildly, groping through the smoke, looking for something—anything—to hold on to. As the doors creaked open, she flung herself on the fallen catwalk and held on as tightly as possible.

When the doors had gotten roughly halfway open, the forcefield that protected them snapped off. The effect was instantaneous. Smoke, fire, and the remaining air in the room raced out through the opening into the vacuum of space. Warheads, pieces of metal, Mathews’ body; all of it flashed by her. For a few moments, she thought that by a miracle, she might just survive. Then the catwalk, which had been wedged in tightly, ripped free. As the doors passed by and she entered the blackness, her mind still functioned.

I guess this is it. A tear rolled down her face, freezing instantly as her mind ran through the memories she wouldn’t be able make, the child she’d never have, the love of her life she would never make memories with. She hoped David would find the video she made for him just before taking the XO position on the Rabin. *Maybe he’ll understand how much I care for and love him.* In the seconds just before Sheila passed, she silently repeated the Lord’s Prayer to herself and hoped that there was truly something more for her in heaven.

34

While the *Lion* and her crew were busy battling the League capital ships, Amir and his wing had been making short work of the remaining League bombers and fighters. Though the losses from his squadrons were much higher than he would expect to see in a fight between nearly equal numbers of League and CDF craft, his wing had finally come out on top. Turning his attention back to the League's capital ships, it was clear from the chatter on the command channel that the *Lion* had taken significant damage, and that she needed backup from her own small craft. Amir pulled up the integrated command operations picture in his HUD and studied the battlefield for a moment. Cueing his communications net, he spoke into the mic, "Tulleny, how are you doing?"

"Just peachy, command." Tulleny's clipped British accent came through Amir's headset loud and clear.

"Form up the bombers; we're going to hit the nearest League cruisers. They're identified as Masters Three and Four in your HUD," Amir said. "The Reapers will cover the bomber flight on its way in and engage point defense emplacements with our neutron cannons."

“Understood, Reaper One. When we get back, you owe us all a drink.”

Amir smirked inside of his flight helmet. “You know I don’t drink.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

While the battle raged outside of the ship between Amir’s wing and the League ships, a different battle was being fought within the engineering spaces of the *Lion of Judah*. Hanson struggled to get the forward shield generators back online and recharged with energy due to damage to the *Lion*’s energy conduits. As he was unable to route power to the proper capacitor, he slammed his fist into the console in frustration.

Dr. Hayworth took notice and laid a hand on Hanson’s shoulder. “Calm yourself, Major. This amounts to our first test of the reactor and power system in a real-world situation. Problems are bound to happen.”

“Doctor, to belabor stating the obvious, we’ve got to get power to the forward shield generator. I don’t see how to do that with the number of relays currently blown,” Hanson said.

“Simple, we reroute the power around the damaged relay using the junction control panels. They function much like large power supply breakers.”

“One problem; those compartments are flooded with high levels of radiation.”

Hayworth shrugged, incredible calm showing through. “Well, there’s a solution for that…sure, we might get some kind of strange cancer twenty years from now, but it beats spending our lives in a League gulag.”

“I’ll get a corpsman down here to administer treatment before we enter the lockers,” Hanson said, and punched up the medical bay on his wrist device. “Medical bay, this is Major Hanson. We need a corpsman with radiation exposure medication to the main engineering room ASAP.”

A second later, Hanson’s wrist device crackled. “Yes, sir, we’re sending someone down now, sir.”

Hanson tapped on his engineering tablet, pulling up a schematic of the ship. “We will need three more volunteers, Doctor. I’ll take the one closest, but we need to reroute four different relay points at the same time.”

Hayworth looked over Hanson’s shoulder for a moment. “Only two more. I’ll take this locker,” he said as he pointed to one of the relay lockers furthest out.

As the two men talked, a couple of contractors who had been listening in walked over. “Sir,” one of them began, addressing Hanson. “We helped configure those lockers last week. More than anyone here, we understand how they’re laid out. We’ll take the other two.”

“I can’t allow you to do that,” Hanson stated, looking at the name badge of the man who did the talking. “Tomilison. It’s too great of a risk for a civilian.”

Tomilison’s face turned to a grimace. “We can handle it, Major. Time is of the essence, and we know exactly what to do.”

Hanson looked at Hayworth, hoping for his approval. Hayworth’s demeanor, however, was inscrutable. “Okay. Take the other two lockers.”

As the two men nodded and began to walk off, Hanson called after them. “Godspeed!”

Hayworth cleared his throat. “I can’t stand that saying.”

“It doesn’t hurt you to hear it said, Doctor.”

“It annoys me.”

“Why don’t we focus on the job at hand and debate religion later?” Hanson replied with a forced smile. “Now let’s get this done.”

35

While Amir and his flight group were busy taking the fight to the League, David had the task of waiting until the shields were recharged, and the fire was out in the forward magazine. *Of all the things I'm good at, waiting isn't one of them*. With nothing else to do but monitor the situation while Amir's fighters struck at the League ships, he studied the tactical plot and made plans to reengage the League ships as soon as the *Lion* was able. He also pondered if Seville had an elite group of crews that he could call on, as the League ships currently opposing them appeared to be far from the poor opponents that he was used to fighting. It all pointed to an elaborate plot to drive a stake into the heart of the Terran Coalition. *If the* Ark Royal *had engaged this battle group, it would have been destroyed, but at least with the* Lion*, we've got a chance to win.*

Looking over at the empty XO chair, David prayed Sheila was having success fighting the fire. Ruth's voice cut into his mental reverie. "Conn, TAO! Friendly fast movers have destroyed Master Four."

David's head snapped back to the tactical plot. "Acknowledged, TAO! What's the status of the remaining contacts?"

“Our fighters are engaging Master Three currently, sir, though roughly twenty percent of them have been disabled or destroyed.”

David frowned; a twenty-percent loss rate among small craft was very high, though it stood to reason that the League fighters were also manned by elite pilots, so perhaps that rate of loss wasn’t as bad as it seemed. *Hopefully, our search and rescue teams can save our pilots after this battle*.

Taylor spoke up from his station. “Conn, communications. Damage control reports that the fire in the forward magazine is out, and the fire relight watch has been set.”

Inwardly, David breathed a heavy sigh of relief. *Way to go, Sheila. That’s going to be worth a nice bottle of something*. He turned his attention back toward the tactical plot. As he watched, one of the icons for the League cruisers winked out.

“Conn, TAO! Master Three has been destroyed,” Ruth said in near real time.

“Acknowledged, TAO,” David said, watching to see what the two remaining Rand class cruisers would do; they formed up near the League dreadnaught but made no attempt to move forward to engage the *Lion*. He believed that they were attempting to provide point defense covering fire for the *Destruction*.

David’s personal communication panel blinked, an incoming message being received from engineering. Punching a button to open the channel, Hanson’s voice was heard. “Conn, engineering. Forward shields are back online and will recharge over the next thirty seconds.”

He couldn’t quite make it out, but Hanson’s breathing sounded labored. “Understood. Overall power plant status?”

“We had radiation leakage through our coolant system and some of the power conduits that overloaded. Several of

us, including myself, have been treated for radiation exposure. No causalities, sir."

At the mention of radiation leakage, David's mind went into overdrive at yet another problem. "Understood, Major. Cohen out."

Glancing up from his console, he looked forward, past Ruth and Hammond. "Conn, TAO. Shield status?"

"Forward shields at eighty-five percent of charge, sir. We're ready to engage the generator."

"TAO, raise forward shields. Navigation, intercept course on Master One." Pausing for a moment, he added, "Let's end this."

David looked toward Taylor. "Communications, get me Colonel Amir."

"Aye aye, sir, Colonel Amir patched into your console."

David spoke into his mic. "Colonel Amir, how's your wing holding up?"

Amir's distorted voice crackled through the speaker. "We're hanging together, sir. About to take another run at the Leaguers."

"Stand by on that, Amir. We're going to engage the remaining League vessels. The TAO will vector you in as we begin our assault."

"Understood, Colonel Cohen."

"*Lion* out," David said, clicking off the communications channel.

"Conn, navigation. Intercept course laid in for Master One, sir," Hammond interjected.

David absorbed her report. "TAO, how many Hunter and Starbolt missiles do we have left in our forward missile launch array?"

"Twelve Hunters, one hundred Starbolts, sir," Ruth said.

David pondered for a moment; with only twelve Hunters remaining, he would have to be judicious in their use.

Starbolt missiles were basically fusion warheads with a rudimentary LIDAR-based tracking system. They were great weapons but were far more susceptible to jamming and point defense. Despite their shortcomings, he reasoned, they could fire the entire salvo off in one shot, overwhelming the point defense systems of the League's flagship. *First things first. Gotta take out those Rands and clear the battle space.*

"Navigation, flank speed."

"Conn, navigation. Flank speed, aye," Hammond said crisply.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master Two, magnetic-cannons and neutron beams."

"Conn, TAO. Firing solutions set for Master Two."

"Match bearings, shoot, all weapons," David said as he glanced down at the tactical plot to see the effect of the weapons' release. Magnetic cannon rounds thundered away from the *Lion*, the energy release nudging the ship slightly to the side, followed up by neutron beam strikes. The League Rand class cruiser took significant damage. With most of its consorts destroyed, it was unable to retreat behind the shields of the other vessels.

"Conn, TAO. Master Two has sustained significant damage," Ruth confirmed before her LIDAR reading showed movement by the League ships. "Conn, TAO! Aspect change, Master One, Two, and Five. Sub-light engine light-off. They're moving toward us at flank speed. Enemy vessels are firing, sir."

David's eyes were glued to the tactical plot; he knew that he had to defeat the League ships in detail. As plasma charges impacted against the *Lion*'s shields, the ship shuddered and rocked. "TAO, firing point procedures, Master Two. Target its engines and weapons with all forward magnetic cannons and neutron beams."

"Conn, TAO. Firing solutions set for Master Two."

“Match bearings, shoot, all weapons.”

More rounds shot out of the mag-cannons and raced toward the Rand class cruiser, slamming into its weakened shields. The first few were stopped, and their kinetic energy absorbed before the cruiser’s shield failed. The rest of the shells slammed into the vessel’s hull, causing multiple explosions. Ruth deftly followed up with neutron beams, which speared the stricken vessel from one end to the other, causing massive secondary explosions. A moment later, the League cruiser exploded into a large cloud of debris.

“Conn, TAO! Master Two destroyed, sir!” Ruth nearly shouted, the tone of her voice crossing from professional to almost gleeful.

David had noticed that Ruth really seemed to enjoy destroying League ships at times. He made a mental note to discuss that privately with her at some point before looking back down to his tactical plot. “Good shooting, TAO,” he said, dialing it down a bit. “TAO, firing point procedures, Master Five. Magnetic cannon and neutron beams.”

David realized that this was becoming something of a rote engagement; the *Lion* clearly held the edge against smaller League ships. She’d taken a beating, though. His status display showed that the *Lion*’s forward shields dipped below sixty percent of their energy rating. Doing some quick math, he estimated they only had five or six more salvos before the forward shields collapsed again. The last Rand had to be neutralized quickly, and he ran multiple scenarios through his head on methods to disable the *Destruction* without a protracted fight.

“Conn, TAO, firing solutions set for Master Five.”

“TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons!” David said almost automatically, his battle rhythm kicking in.

As the *Lion* stabbed at the remaining Rand with its weapons suite, incoming fire from both League ships

impacted the *Lion*'s shield grid. Sectors overloaded and failed, leaving other parts of the grid to compensate for their loss. Soon, the overworked shield generator would fail again and leave the *Lion* defenseless along her forward arc.

"Conn, TAO. Aspect change, Master Five. Master Five has taken position out of line of fire behind Master One."

"Acknowledged, TAO," David said, looking back to his plot. *So this is it*. All or nothing, and success depended on his next course of action. "Communications, get me Colonel Amir."

"Colonel Amir is now linked into your comm panel, sir," Taylor said after a moment.

"Go ahead, Colonel Cohen," Amir's voice crackled.

David spoke into the microphone on his chair. "Amir, do you have enough anti-ship munitions left to effectively engage the point defense systems on the *Destruction*?"

There was a pause on the line before Amir's voice came through. "Many of my bombers are Winchester, sir." Winchester was the code phrase for "out of ammunition." "But we have enough to degrade the *Destruction*'s point defense emplacements on one arc."

David looked to Ruth. "Okay, this is what we're going to do, everyone. We only get one shot, so pay attention. Navigation, lay in a course that takes us to point-blank range of Master One, then takes us on a parallel course to her. TAO, we're going to engage Master One with our magnetic cannons and our neutron beams as we approach, fire a final broadside into her at point-blank range, and then we're going to launch every last missile we have in our forward VRLS array into that ship. While we're doing this, Colonel Amir and his wing will engage Master One and destroy as many point defense emplacements as possible, to ensure enough of our missiles get through to knock Master One out. Everyone clear on their part?"

There were nods from Ruth and Hammond; Amir's voice came through loud and clear. "Yes, sir!"

"Colonel Amir, proceed to attack Master One's point defense emplacements."

"Aye, sir. Amir out."

"Conn, navigation, course laid in as ordered," Hammond called out.

"Navigation, engage full speed."

"Engaged, sir."

The inertial force of the massive ship moving forward could be felt throughout the vessel; even with inertial dampening fields, David was still pressed back into his seat just a bit. "TAO, firing point procedures, Master One, magnetic cannons and neutron beams."

"Conn, TAO, firing solutions set."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot all weapons," David ordered, looking down at his tactical plot, showing the remaining fighters from Amir's wing engaging Master One. Over the next few minutes, multiple salvos were exchanged between the *Lion* and the *Destruction*. While Amir's fighters took a beating, they succeeded at knocking down many point defense emplacements along the side of the *Destruction* that David planned to assault with one hundred and twelve missiles.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master One, magnetic cannons, neutron beams, and all remaining missiles in our forward missile cell."

"Conn, TAO. Firing solutions set."

David looked toward Hammond as more enemy fire slammed into the *Lion*. "Navigation, ETA to parallel course on Master One?"

"Thirty seconds, sir."

Almost as soon as Hammond finished her report, Ruth broke in, "Conn, TAO! Forward shield has collapsed, sir!"

David confirmed the report almost immediately on his viewer. Recalling a line from military history in which a captain of a ship long ago said, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” he pressed on. “Navigation, stay on course. Flank speed. TAO, lock all magnetic cannons into position for a full broadside.”

The *Destruction* continued to pound the *Lion*; the ship shuddered with each hit, the energy from the impacts translating into shudders and shakes. Several consoles on the bridge suffered from blown fuses and an overload blew out a power junction over the CIC. Through it all, David stared forward, his eyes going between the view of the outside, and his tactical plot. As the ship lined up for what he hoped was the final attack, he gave the order to fire. “TAO, shoot, all weapons, Master One!”

One hundred and twelve missiles thundered out of the *Lion*’s forward launch array, along with a salvo of magnetic cannon shells. The shells hit first at close range, severely weakening the shields of the *Destruction*. It took the missiles a few seconds to lock on to the *Destruction*, after which they plunged into short terminal burns, exploding across the surface of the massive ship. The degraded point defense systems could only stop a few of the multi-megaton yield fusion weapons, which continued to rain down on the dreadnought. Eventually, the *Destruction*’s shields failed, and the warheads exploded on its armor and superstructure. Large chunks of the enemy vessel’s armor blasted off into space under the might of the torrent of fire; adding to the maelstrom was neutron beam fire from the *Lion of Judah*, slicing through the weakened hull of the *Destruction*. The onslaught was simply too great; secondary explosions began to occur throughout the *Destruction,* and without warning, its engineering section violently blew apart, crippling what was left of the starship.

"Our stern has exploded, Admiral!" the panicked voice of the tactical officer called out. The bridge rocked furiously, throwing crewmembers out of their harnesses. Fires started as massive power overloads coursed through the energy conduits of the mighty vessel, shorting on consoles and causing secondary explosions.

"Engineering, report!" Seville shouted.

"Confirmed, Admiral! Our stern, along with the reactor cores, suffered a catastrophic breach!"

No... so close. How could these religious fanatics defeat my finest ships? "Can we move?" Seville asked.

"Admiral... we don't have any engines or reactors to power them. The *Destruction* is crippled," an engineering sub-station officer said.

"We should consider abandoning ship," Strappi said into Seville's ear, just quiet enough not to be heard outside of a few feet.

As Seville pondered the idea, another wave of explosions rocked the bridge, causing pieces of the overhead to collapse. Collapsed metal filled the bridge, some pieces impaling members of the crew, others destroying consoles. Smoke spread out, covering the entire space in a haze. Before he could react, debris fell directly on top of his chair; searing pain swept through his body and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Then unconsciousness took him into its merciful embrace.

THE BRIDGE CREW of the *Lion* watched it unfold on their monitors as Ruth reported it. Her voice went up an octave. "Conn, TAO! Master One neutralized, sir!"

Shouts rang out from across the bridge, but the master chief cut that off quickly. "As you were! Maintain proper bridge protocol!"

David stood up from his chair and walked over to Ruth's station. "Is any part of Master One combat capable, TAO?"

Ruth shook her head. "Negative, sir. I'm showing lifepod launches now. Master Five is picking them up…Master Five has powered down its weapons systems and has charged its Lawrence drive." She glanced up at David. "Would you like to engage, sir?"

David paused for a moment. The League had killed so many; destroyed the lives of millions of people throughout the Terran Coalition, not to mention its own citizens*. I'm no better than them if I kill fleeing people in lifepods. Enough death for one day*. Looking down at Ruth, he said, "Negative, TAO. Do not engage. We'll let them run back to Earth and spread word of our new combat capability."

David half expected Ruth to argue with him on the bridge; the fire shone in her eyes, but decorum prevailed. "Aye, sir. Standing down," she said, frustration coming through in her voice.

David walked back to his chair and sat down. "Communications, signal the air boss to launch search and rescue. Let's get our pilots home."

SEVILLE SLOWLY BECAME aware of his surroundings as consciousness returned. The walls of the passageway he was in slowly moved, and he realized someone was dragging him.

"Where am I?"

“Deck three, Admiral,” Strappi said, panting.

Seville fell to the deck, roughly, and the political officer’s face appeared in his line of sight. “I gave the order to abandon ship. The *Destruction* is lost, as was the battle.”

“My crew?”

“The remaining cruiser is picking up as many lifepods as it can. They’re waiting until we can get you on board and the Terrans have ceased firing. We must hurry, Admiral.”

“I’m not going to be of much use. I can’t feel my legs,” Seville said, his voice weak and hoarse.

“Just lie still. We’re only a hundred meters from safety.”

All he’d have to do is leave me to die. I would have left him, just like I left his counterpart twenty-seven years ago. Why would he help me now?

Strappi picked him up again by the shoulders and dragged Seville down the corridor. It seemed like hours before they reached a bank of escape pods, and he was roughly shoved into the nearest open hatch. As the pod hurtled toward the lone League vessel that remained intact, he pondered what had gone wrong.

I don’t care what it takes or how long it takes me. I will kill David Cohen and destroy the Terran Coalition. Pain spread across every fiber of his being, while his mind focused on one thing—and one thing only—revenge.

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Calvin looked down at the ticking clock; it was almost like something out of a goofy holodrama, each second one closer to their last. “Gunny, can you disarm this thing?” he asked Uzun before taking up a defensive position in front of the console.

Uzun immediately pulled out a small tablet and began interfacing it with the League machine. After thirty seconds, he looked up at Calvin. “Colonel, without the command codes for this ship, I can’t disarm the self-destruct from here.”

Calvin whirled around. “Gunny, I need options. Right now, because leaving my brothers and sisters behind is not an option.”

“I can disarm it from inside the reactor core.”

Inside his helmet, Calvin made a face. “Gunny, isn’t an energized reactor core highly radioactive, not to mention incredibly hot?”

“This ship’s reactor was SCRAMED, so it’s cooled off enough that I can walk around it inside of my suit.”

“Okay, but the radiation hasn’t just disappeared. You can’t go in there,” Calvin retorted.

Uzun grabbed Calvin's battle armor and pulled his helmet in so they were touching, "Colonel, listen to me. I have to disarm the self-destruct on this ship or we're all dead. There's still enough time for the boarding teams to get out, but not to evacuate the POWs. I'm not leaving a brother or sister in arms behind, just as much as you wouldn't. The only way for me to stop that self-destruct is to enter the reactor core."

Calvin shook his head inside his helmet, "No can do, Gunny. You enter that core and you're dead. There's got to be another way."

Uzun shook Calvin's battle armor. "I will have forty-five seconds once I get inside. That's enough to cut the required circuits so that the self-destruct charges won't fire. There is no other way. Now get the hell out of my way."

Calvin knew Uzun was right. He would do it himself, but he didn't know what to do inside the core. "Okay, Gunny. When you get to heaven's shores, you make sure they're properly guarded by Marines, you hear me?" he said, trying his utmost to push the pain out of his voice as he stepped aside.

Uzun pushed forward, entering the heavily lead-lined airlock that led to the reactor core. "I will do my best, Colonel." As the airlock cycled, he continued, "Colonel, it was an honor to serve with you."

Calvin watched from the window on the other side of the airlock. "Likewise, Gunny. Godspeed."

Uzun snapped off a final salute in Calvin's direction as the inner airlock door opened and he dashed through. The door automatically closed behind him.

Calvin stood in front of the airlock that led to the reactor, staring at the countdown on the heads-up display inside of his battle armor. After forty seconds, and with fifteen

seconds to go on the countdown, he heard Uzun's scratchy voice within his communications set.

"Colonel… it's done. I disconnected more than enough circuits to prevent a self-destruct."

Calvin could hear Uzun coughing and gasping for breath. "Gunny, you hang tight. I'm going to get help and we're going to get you out of there," he said, knowing as he uttered the words they were a lie.

"You're a good liar, Colonel. I only have one request. Tell my wife and my sons that I love them very much and that I hope to see them again in paradise."

Calvin almost told Uzun that he'd tell them himself but decided against it. There was no way the man was walking out of that core alive. "You have my word, Gunny," Calvin said, choking down his own emotion.

"Thank you, Colonel."

"You hang in there, Uzun. That's an order, Marine."

There's gotta be a way for me to get in here. Calvin ran the gauntlet of his suit across the airlock opening, scanning its interior. The radiation was off the charts. *I go in there, I'm dead too. Nothing I can do to help him now*. He pulled up the lifesign indicator for Uzun's suit and found it had flatlined. "Damn it."

Calvin looked up to see Cabello and two other Marines walking toward him. Cabello approached, brought himself to attention, and saluted Calvin. "Colonel, mission accomplished. This ship is secured."

Calvin quickly returned the salute. "Good work, Major. Casualties? Status of the POWs?"

"Six Marines KIA, sir. Almost everyone else on the breach team was wounded, including me. Minor injuries for the most part. A lot of bruised egos," Cabello answered with something of a smirk. "POWs are secured, but they're not in great shape. We need to get doctors up here, and they'll need

some food. Still, this is a good day. We saved a lot of our own."

Calvin looked over his shoulder at the airlock door. "It still cost us a lot. Uzun sacrificed himself to stop the self-destruct." Calvin turned back to Cabello. "There are days I get really sick of this war, Major. I'm sick of seeing good men and women willingly sacrifice themselves just to save another. It's a damn waste if you ask me. All for some bunch of communist assholes that can't be content with controlling hundreds of planets." He was silent for a moment as his eyes swept the engineering space. "Get support up here and start rounding up the prisoners."

"Yes, sir!" Cabello said crisply before turning away to carry out his orders.

Calvin stared at the airlock door, thinking about Uzun's sacrifice, the sacrifice of so many of the men and women under his command over the years, his own sacrifices, and those of his wife. While saving the POWs was a victory, it seemed like a bitter defeat to have been so close to peace, only to find out it was all a lie.

37

In the intervening minutes, the last two League ships jumped out, taking with them as many lifepods as they could carry. Their exit was so hasty that the League ships left behind many pods, which the *Lion*'s search and rescue teams collected, along with ejected pilots.

David observed that the mood on the bridge of the *Lion of Judah* was one of near jubilation as he stared at the tactical view, watching as Colonel Amir's wing returned. He shared their mood, knowing that the decisive defeat of the League battle group could mark a turning point in the war. If nothing else, it would provide a much-needed boost to the flagging morale of a war-weary nation. *What better way to do that than by destroying the flagship of the League fleet and hopefully killing its leader?*

He chastised himself for hoping Seville dead. Regardless of the man's crimes, David knew it wasn't his place to judge. That was God's job, but a part of him sorely hoped that one of the shells fired into the side of the *Destruction* had arranged a face-to-face meeting today. *Where's Sheila? She needs to get back up here to share in the celebration for a job well done.*

Taylor interrupted David's thoughts. "Conn, communications. I have Colonel Demood for you, sir, on the video link."

"Put him through to my viewer, Lieutenant."

A moment later, Calvin's face appeared on David's monitor, blood streaked and his armor blackened. "Sir, can you hear me?" Calvin asked.

"Loud and clear, Colonel."

"Sir, we've secured the transport and rescued at least three thousand POWs. Mission accomplished," Calvin said with a sense of pride.

David sat back in his chair. "That…is incredible news, Colonel. Any causalities on our side?"

"Light, sir. I've got eighteen Marines KIA, twenty-three seriously wounded, and I think almost all of us got hit by something." Calvin cracked a smile as he finished the last line. "We gave a hell of a lot better than we took, sir."

David nodded into his viewer. "Good job, Demood. We'll be back shortly."

"One other thing, Colonel. We lost a contractor who volunteered for the mission. One of the finest displays of bravery I've ever seen. Without him, none of us would be here. You make sure he's remembered."

"You have my word. No one will be forgotten today," David said, raising an eyebrow at the mention of a contractor going into combat. He decided not to inquire about the clearly broken regulations.

"Thank you, sir. Demood out."

David looked around the bridge, standing to acknowledge the celebration with his crew. "Good job, everyone," he said in a loud voice to no one in particular before putting his hands together as he started to clap.

The result was infectious; officers, enlisted personnel, and senior NCOs all clapped and cheered. Then, as quickly as

it started, the release of emotion was done; the bridge crew went back to their duties, and David stared forward, proud of them for what they accomplished.

“Sir,” Taylor said with an unusual tenor to his voice. “I have a message for you from engineering. I think you may want to take this in private.”

David looked to Taylor quizzically. “I’m sure I can hear anything from engineering on the bridge, Lieutenant. What’s going on?”

Taylor swallowed hard. “Sir, Major Thompson was in the forward magazine when it was exposed to vacuum. She was sucked into space, sir.”

Even as Taylor said the words, David tried to rationalize it away. “Our emergency pressure suits only have six hours of air. We need to get search and rescue into space immediately. Contact Colonel Amir on a priority channel, Lieutenant.”

Taylor eye’s locked down. “I’m sorry, sir. She wasn’t wearing a suit, sir.” Taylor looked back up. “There is no way she could have survived, sir.”

David was stunned and at a loss for words for a few moments. His mind ran through any scenario in which Sheila could have survived…but found none. As it started to sink in, his emotions began to fail him. Everything began to fail him. The room spun, and all he could think of was that it couldn’t be true, that it had to be a bad dream, it couldn’t be real. When the spinning stopped and Taylor was still staring at him, the enormity of losing his best friend hit him like a ton of bricks.

“I see,” he said slowly. “Deploy search and rescue. We owe it to her to find her body to bring home for a proper Christian burial.” He stumbled over the final words, not wanting them to be true. His voice broke, and he almost started sobbing right there on the bridge.

“Yes, sir, immediately, sir.”

Ruth and Hammond looked at each other from their respective consoles, looks of concern appearing on their faces.

“Lieutenant Goldberg, you have the conn,” David said slowly. He stood up from his chair and stepped to one side.

Ruth stood up. “This is Lieutenant Goldberg, I have the conn,” she said formally, sitting down in the command chair.

“I will be in my cabin,” David said with great difficulty. His objective now was just to get off the bridge without breaking down in tears in front of his crew.

As he walked toward the back of the bridge where the exit was, each step became harder. Every passing second seemed like an eternity. His steps slowed and tears ran down his face. Master Chief Tinetariro saw it and walked to his side.

“Let me help you, sir,” she said under her breath, not wishing to draw attention to the obvious pain and anguish. Taking David’s arm, she guided him into the gangway behind the bridge. After the door to the bridge closed behind them, he looked at her. “Thank you, Master Chief,” he managed to get out between sobs. “I need to be alone.”

“I know what you’re going through, sir. I’ve had to lay too many friends into the dirt. If you want to talk, I’m here,” Tinetariro said.

“I’ve lost more friends than I can count…but this…” David swallowed hard. “This is just different. Not her…”

“If I die in cold space, send my body home to rest, fold my hands across my chest, and tell my mom I did my best,” Tinetariro said, repeating an often-heard CDF marching cadence.

Slowly growing numb, David halfway smiled despite the tears rolling down his face. “Thank you, Master Chief,” he said sadly. “Carry on.”

Tinetariro nodded silently and watched as David made his way down the passageway.

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SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Ruth still held the conn. Causality reports were coming in, and the rescue teams combing the wreckage of the League ships had finished their work. Of the twenty-nine fighters and bombers that had been lost, search and rescue had found eighteen of the pilots and brought them home safe. They'd lost another nine personnel onboard the *Lion*, plus the Marines that had died storming the transport. After entering all the names into the ship's log, Ruth transmitted the list and the actions of the day to the CDF Command.

Dozens of ships' worth of reinforcements had arrived, led by the CSV *Ark Royal* and her battle group. General Barton, however, was conspicuously absent. Ruth found herself hoping he had been relieved of command. *I hate defeatists*. Hanging over the bridge, however, was the death of Sheila. Ruth had grown to count her as a close friend in the seven months they had served together, but she knew that Sheila meant far more to David. She understood that they'd known each other since boot camp, nearly seventeen years ago. After his exit from the bridge, all of them knew that David's spirit was crushed. Ruth had prayed for him and dearly hoped he would walk back through the doors at the aft of the

bridge to retake command. At least the rescue teams had located her body; it could be given the proper burial that Sheila deserved.

"Conn, communications. I have General MacIntosh requesting a video link," Taylor said.

"Communications, route it to the command viewer."

A few seconds later, General MacIntosh's face appeared on the viewer. His features curled with surprise as he realized Ruth was in the CO's chair. "Lieutenant Goldberg," he said without preamble. "I didn't expect to see you holding the conn. Where is Colonel Cohen and Major Thompson?"

Ruth swallowed. "Sir, have you received the reports we passed back through the *Ark Royal*?"

MacIntosh stared at her in a way that betrayed his impatience. "Nothing detailed, Lieutenant. All I know is that we won. Now answer my question."

"Colonel Cohen is in his quarters, sir. Major Thompson was killed in action."

MacIntosh's mouth dropped open and hung there for a moment. "I see. I'm sorry, Lieutenant. What's the status of the rest of the crew and the ship?"

"We had light causalities, sir, mostly among our pilots and the Marines. The ship took some armor and hull damage, but we're fine. Nothing a couple of days docked at Canaan station can't fix," Ruth said, focusing her mind elsewhere to avoid any display of emotion.

"That is good to hear, Lieutenant. When are you jumping back to Canaan?"

"As soon as we recover the last of our search and rescue craft, General."

"Very well. Please pass on my condolences to Colonel Cohen. I'll be waiting for you all at the Canaan station. Godspeed, MacIntosh out."

The viewer shut off before Ruth could respond. She then turned to Taylor. “Communications, signal our search and rescue unit. Please confirm they are returning to the ship and have completed their work.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Taylor said. A few moments later, he spoke again.. “They should be back onboard within thirty minutes, conn.”

“Navigation, make ready to jump back to Canaan as soon as they’re fully onboard.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The time seemed to pass by quickly for Ruth as the final wave of search and rescue craft were onboard back into the hangar bays of the *Lion*. Ruth reviewed the logs from the weapons and defensive systems during the engagement for the fiftieth time. In the coming days, she was certain that she could get better performance out of the systems of the ship now that they had concrete data on how the new technology performed in actual combat.

Once the air boss had confirmed that the hangar was secured, Ruth said, “Navigation, are we ready to jump back to Canaan?”

“Charged and ready to engage, ma’am.”

“Navigation, engage Lawrence drive.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Hammond triggered the *Lion*’s massive Lawrence drive, opening an artificial wormhole directly in front of the mighty ship. Flying through the wormhole under sub-light propulsion, the *Lion* crossed several lightyears of space in the blink of an eye.

“Conn, navigation. Wormhole transit complete; emergence within hundred kilometers of projected.”

“Navigation, put us into orbit around Canaan. Communications, signal Canaan space control and request a berth at Canaan’s main shipyard,” Ruth ordered.

As Ruth's commands were acknowledged and she gave the order to dock at Canaan's main shipyard, the third watch tactical officer that currently manned the tactical station turned back to look at her. "Ma'am, I think you might want to see this."

Ruth raised an eyebrow at the young man, who was clearly departing from bridge protocol. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"It would be best if I put up on our main viewer."

"Very well."

A moment later, the holoscreen came alive with images of the exterior ship. There were dozens of ships, mostly CDF, some national state militaries of the CDF, and even civilian yachts lining the route the *Lion* would take to her berth. As the *Lion* passed, each ship fired a tracer round from their magnetic-cannons or made a visual display of some kind.

The bridge crew watched in fascination as the multi-colored salute went on and on. "Communications, transmit a picture of a broom to the fleet," Ruth said.

Taylor looked at her quizzically. "Ma'am?"

Ruth smiled. "Something Colonel Cohen did after a successful patrol on the *Rabin*. It's the signal for a clean sweep; a completely successful mission where we swept the enemy out of space."

Taylor broke into a grin, as did a number of the personnel on the bridge. "Yes, ma'am!"

For the next hour, the bridge crew maneuvered the *Lion* into her berth at Canaan station, after which Ruth informed David that the ship was docked. He was still declining voice communications and remained in his cabin. She privately worried for him, but she knew that he needed space and time to grieve.

After the *Lion* was fully docked and secured, David received several messages from Ruth on his personal tablet, asking him to come to the bridge. Her final plea asked him to join the senior officers in the cargo bay to perform the ceremony to offload the fallen soldiers, as their caskets were the first to leave the ship. Staring ahead in a stupor, he ignored her messages. In his mind, he asked over and over, *Why?* On a logical level, David couldn't quite wrap his mind around why this one death had completely wiped him out emotionally. Death was something that knocked on the door every day; it was as Seville said, a constant companion to a soldier. But this…this was different. The door chime went off, interrupting his thoughts. After a few seconds of ignoring it, the chime went off again, then again.

"Open!" he finally spat.

The hatch to his cabin unlocked and Calvin strode in. "Colonel."

"Colonel Demood."

"David," Demood began, "I know what this is like. I've led Marines into battle for many years. I've seen the horrors of war and I've had men die in my arms."

David looked up. "Sheila was more than just someone under my command. She was my best friend in this entire messed-up galaxy."

Calvin made his way over to the couch David sat on and sat down beside him without preamble. "Maybe I haven't had my best friend die under my command, I'll give you that. Look, Cohen, you can sit down here with the lights off and allow yourself to be swallowed up by the pain. Or you can stand up, walk out of here with me, and go show Major Thompson and the rest of those who died today on this ship the honor that they deserve."

Calvin's words stung; his first reaction was to clap back, but he realized almost instantly that the older Marine was

right. Sitting here and feeling sorry for himself was unbecoming, and if nothing else, it insulted Sheila's memory. After a period of silence, he responded, "You're right, Demood. Give me a few minutes, and I'll join you in the hangar."

Calvin put his hand on David's shoulder. "I'll see you shortly, Colonel," he said.

David watched Calvin walk out of his stateroom, and then forced himself to get up. He checked his uniform to ensure it was all properly fitted and within regulation, and then he made his way to the hangar deck onboard the *Lion*. During his fifteen-minute walk, he passed by hundreds of crewmen and women, officers and enlisted. All of them were seemingly energized, and morale was high. Considering for a moment that most didn't know the XO was dead, nor did any of them have the same kind of connection, he knew their reactions were normal, but it still made David mad.

The more he thought about the entire situation, the angrier he got. Reflecting back on his decision not to fire on the escape pods detaching from the *Destruction*, nor to fire on the remaining League cruiser, right then, David realized that if he could go back and change his decision, he'd have killed every last one of them.

As he strode into the hangar bay, there were several dozen caskets arrayed across the floor near the giant space doors. An honor guard had been assembled, and the onboard band was present. David walked down the four rows of caskets, each adorned with the flag of the Terran Coalition; wondering which one was Sheila's, he called out to the nearest enlisted crewman, "Corporal! Which one of these contains the remains of Major Thompson?"

A ruddy-faced young man walked closer to David. "Sir! Please follow me, sir."

After a short walk, David stood in front of a casket as the corporal gestured to it. “Major Thompson’s remains are in this one, sir.”

David glanced at the young man, still angry and sullen. “Thank you, Corporal.”

Looking around the room, he saw a single casket off to the side, its top uncovered. Furrowing his brow, David shifted his gaze back to the young corporal. “Why does that casket lack a flag?” he asked.

“Sir, that casket contains the remains of a contractor, sir. Regulations state that—”

“Which contractor, Corporal?”

“Hadi Uzun, sir.”

“The man that died on the transport?” David asked, having seen Calvin’s after-action report.

“Yes, sir.”

“The one man that kept thousands of POWs from being killed?” David said, his voice growing louder and his face turning red with anger.

“Sir, it is against regulations—”

“Do not quote regulations to me, Corporal!” David shouted. He was so close to losing control that his hand felt for the sidearm he’d been carrying earlier on his leg.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You will retrieve a flag and dress his casket with the proper respect it deserves. Are we clear, Corporal?”

“Crystal, sir!”

“Why are you still standing in front of me? Get moving, Corporal!”

The young man scurried off as fast as he could. Calvin and Tinetariro, who had been watching the exchange, made their way over to David.

Calvin was the first to speak. “Are you okay, sir?”

David turned toward him. “I’ll be okay if that’s what you’re asking, Colonel.”

“You seemed a little wound up there, sir.”

“The least we can do is honor their sacrifices.”

“Of course.”

Standing there, David knew he had overacted and torn a bloody strip out of a solider that was just doing his job and trying to do that job within the rules. Right now, though, that just didn’t matter. Going between hurt and anger, he was looking for targets, and a regulation that seemed to not fit the situation was a great starting point.

Calvin and Tinetariro exchanged glances with each other before Tinetariro spoke. “Sir, I must remind you that Corporal Lewis was simply following regulations and orders, sir.”

David’s eye lit up with anger as he considered what the master chief said. Control had begun to return, though, and he bit off the angry comment that leapt to mind. “Of course, Master Chief.”

David returned his gaze to Sheila’s casket. More than anything, he just wanted to see her one last time. *It should be me there. I should have gone to fight the fire and died, not her. I deserve to die for all the pain and suffering I’ve caused through my actions. Not her.* Forcing himself not to tear up, he turned and walked away from the rest of the people in the hangar, staring out of the force shield protected area where fighters and bombers were launched from.

David wasn’t sure how long he stared out into space considering the events of the last week. At some point, he was snapped out of his thoughts by a voice speaking to him from behind.

“Colonel,” Kenneth Lowe, the program manager for the contractors said quietly.

It took David a few moments to process Kenneth's presence and turn toward him. "Kenneth."

"Sir, I wanted to thank you for the respect extended to Hadi. He was a good man. One of my best field electronics engineers."

"He deserved nothing less."

"It's been an honor, sir."

David turned his head to see Kenneth extending his hand. He reached forward and shook it firmly. "That feels like goodbye."

"You're not the only one that has a knack for breaking regulations, sir," Kenneth said with some level of levity.

"You weren't supposed to stay on the ship after we put into space?"

"No, sir. I was specifically ordered not to do that."

"If you hadn't, we wouldn't be here. Only God knows how bad it would have been."

"That doesn't matter to SSI leadership. I've been given a choice between termination or resigning."

David turned around fully to face Kenneth. "You've got to be shitting me," he said, the anger rising in him again.

"No, sir. Don't worry, you're in good hands with my deputy. He and the rest of the team will see you through."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kenneth. How are you going to fight it?"

"Honestly, sir, I can't, in good conscience, continue to work for the man I report to. I'm going to resign... that'll make it easier to find another job. Perhaps someone will want to hire me. I'll be back on CDF special programs in a week." At the sight of a frown from David, Kenneth pressed on. "It's okay, sir. The only thing that counts is the mission."

David reflected on the harsh reality that, at times, regardless if what you did was the right thing, if you ran

afoul of the system, the system would grind you down. “Good luck out there,” he finally replied before extending his hand one more time. The two men shook hands firmly before Kenneth departed without further words, leaving David to his mental anguish.

After what seemed like an eternity spending time alone with his thoughts, the space station’s honor guard was ready for the ceremonial removal of the fallen. Joined by an honor guard from the Marines onboard the *Lion*, as well as a couple of musicians from the band, they all assembled just outside of the hangar bay on what was referred to as the docking slip. The musicians began to play the hymn “Amazing Grace” as the pallbearers carried the caskets from the ship down the gangway to the awaiting vehicles for transport. It was, in many ways, a repeat of the ceremony David had participated in just two weeks prior on the *Rabin*. David’s hand snapped to his brow in salute as each casket was carried down the gangway. The biggest difference between that dark day two weeks ago and today was that Sheila was not at his side. Instead, she was in one of the caskets. His heart broke in a way he had never felt as they carried her away.

Another difference was that some of the families of those lost had been able to make it to the docking slip along with members of the press. David bristled at the intrusion of the media; in his mind, they had no place in this, the most solemn of rituals performed by the CDF. As each casket was unloaded, one of the members of the honor guard announced the name of the fallen solider. If the family was present, David could hear their sobs as the casket came forward.

Fighting to keep himself stoic in the face of the immense anguish he felt, David heard Hadi Uzun’s name announced. As the flag-draped casket that contained Uzun’s remains was taken down the gangway, a woman, whom David

immediately assumed was his wife, tore across the rope line that separated the onlookers from the ceremony. She rushed the casket, nearly toppling it from the anti-grav sled it had been placed on, crying in agony at the top of her lungs and holding on to the casket containing her husband as it moved down the gangway.

A number of members of the honor guard exchanged glances, but no one wanted to be the one to pry her away from the casket. As the ranking officer, David knew that task belonged to him. Walking across the gangway, he made his way over to the woman and put his hand on her shoulder. She turned to look at him, despair, grief, and pure sadness etched into her face.

"Why?" she said between sobs. "He'd been medically discharged. He wasn't even in the military," she said in heavily accented English.

"Mrs. Uzun?" David asked, and she nodded. "I didn't have the privilege to know your husband. I know he joined the rescue mission for the POWs because he felt he was the only man that could do the job. His sacrifice saved the lives of thousands. It's a small comfort, but you should be proud of him," David managed to get out in a level voice.

She took her hands off the casket and stood up tall. "That sounds like him. Always trying to right a wrong," she stated as tears streamed down her face.

David stepped forward and embraced her, then guided her back to the area reserved for the families. They stood there together as the rest of the caskets were removed. Sheila's was the last to go due to her position as the XO. As soon as her name was announced, he stiffened. Try as he might, he could not hold in his emotions. He cried openly as her casket proceeded down the gangway.

Uzun's wife took note and put her hand on his. "A friend?" she asked.

“My best friend in this crazy universe that we live in,” David replied.

“I am so sorry.”

“I hate this war,” David said.

“Uzun used to say that it was better to die on our feet than live on our knees.”

David turned his head. “Wise words.”

A few moments later, Sheila’s casket was loaded into a vehicle and left the docking slip. The honor guard and those assembled began to depart. After saying his goodbyes to Uzun’s wife, he stood on the dock for a long time. Eventually, General MacIntosh roused David out of his contemplation. He briefed the general on the battle and what happened with the League peace delegation. Seeing that David’s heart was crushed, MacIntosh let him go and decided to resume the conversation later, but not before telling him that he and the command staff of the *Lion* were to be present the next day at a joint press conference with the President of the Terran Coalition and Chief Minister of the Saurian Empire.

Several hours later, David returned to his stateroom on the *Lion*. As he walked through the door, he tugged off his uniform sweater. After adjusting the lights to his liking, he sat on the couch for a while. David still could not make sense of the events in recent days; he was certainly not at peace with the fact that he would never see Sheila again. Trying to focus on a problem he could solve to take his mind off the pain, he decided to track down someone higher up the chain at SSI and talk to them about Kenneth and his team. Pulling out his tablet, he made a video call to SSI’s main headquarters. After the link connected, a smiling young woman’s face filled this screen. “Strathclyde Shipboard Integrators, how may I help you?” David attempted a smile in return.

“Hello. I’d like to speak with Margaret Lee, please.”

“I’m sorry, but Ms. Lee is in a meeting.”

“It’s very important I speak with her, Miss.”

“Who may I ask is calling?”

“Colonel David Cohen, Commanding Officer, CSV *Lion of Judah*.”

There was a pregnant pause from the young woman as she processed David’s rank, name, and the name of his ship. “*The* Colonel Cohen?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Wait one moment, please. I’ll get her for you straight away.”

The screen switched to the SSI logo with an infomercial playing in the background. Pondering for a moment how joyless everything seemed, he realized that what just happened should be funny to him, but he could only barely muster a small smile. “What’s wrong with me?” he asked absentmindedly, even though no one was there to hear him.

A moment later, Margaret Lee appeared on the tablet. “Colonel Cohen, such a pleasure to speak to you today. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Thank you for taking my call, Ms. Lee. I’m reaching out to you to discuss your contracting team led by Kenneth Lowe.”

“Is there a problem, Colonel?” Margaret asked, her facial expression betraying concern.

“Not per se, at least, not at this time. I would like to let you know that the actions of your team, and especially those of its leadership, including Mr. Lowe, as far as I’m concerned, were in the finest traditions of the Coalition Defense Force.”

“I see,” she forced out. “Were you aware of Mr. Lowe’s plan to stay onboard the ship when it put into space?”

“I was. In discussions with him, we determined that his team staying onboard was the only way to get the ship operational in case all of its functions were needed. Which… they were.”

“I wasn’t aware of that, Colonel. I thought it was simply a decision by Mr. Lowe. He is an outstanding program manager, but he can be rash.”

David smiled. “I have been called worse in my career, ma’am.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I understand there may be some…impediments to Mr. Lowe continuing to support the *Lion*.”

“Ah, perhaps. I can’t really comment on that, Colonel. It’s an internal matter, as I’m sure you can understand.”

“Of course. But I would be remiss if I didn’t tell you that I view his continued support of this vessel as vital to our ongoing mission to defend the Terran Coalition. I hope that carries the appropriate weight with you and his other superiors.”

Margaret pursed her lips together. “Of course, I understand, Colonel. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, ma’am—just keep the upgrades to my ship coming and a solid team to work on my ship.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Good day.”

“Good day, Ms. Lee.” David pressed the button to disconnect the call. He was confident that the message had been received. Now he would try to go to bed and prepare himself for a joint press conference tomorrow with the leaders of both the Terran Coalition and the Saurian Empire. The funerals were still being scheduled, but Sheila would be given full military honors. He understood President Spencer would be attending in person. He knew that just getting through them would be difficult. After that, he somehow had to get himself ready to go back out to fight. Leaning his head

back on the couch, he wondered if he would ever be right again.

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Obi Sherazi, the chief minister of the Saurian Empire's governing body, walked with a small group of advisors and his security detail toward what the Terrans called the "South Briefing Room" within their governmental complex on Canaan. The Saurians were a race of bi-pedal humanoid aliens that the Terran Coalition had encountered roughly two centuries before. The two races had fought several hot wars and experienced a period of a cold war before relations warmed and they became, if not allies, at least trading partners that considered each other friends. Saurians, in general appearance, lacked hair; the tops of their heads were instead a colorful patch of scales. Sherazi had visited the complex on numerous occasions, as he had been attempting to act as a broker between both the Terran Coalition and the League of Sol in the interests of creating a lasting peace. The last twenty-four hours had seen both the high-water mark for those efforts, followed by the realization that the League simply had no honor. There wouldn't be a peace unless the League was defeated militarily first.

"We have to do something more to respond," Sherazi said, more of a rhetorical statement of what he was thinking than anything else.

His senior advisor, Sardar Ihejirika—a younger Saurian who had been aligned with him for some time—flared his scales. "What would you have us do, Chief Minister? We tried to do what the Terrans couldn't...get them a peace deal."

Sherazi bristled. "We have sat back for years and watched this play out. Haven't you once considered that we should be helping them more than we have?"

"I'm not inclined to counsel you to help the race that set our empire back a hundred years."

Sherazi hissed. "Why do you persist in that old way of thinking? Our empire had grown overconfident, insular, and decadent. We thought we had the right to decide who was allowed to exist. The fact that the Terrans helped us rebuild after they defeated our empire shows us their true nature. One could even say that the war was one of the best things to happen to our empire in centuries! They showed us who we truly are."

"Send them a few more ships or lift the rules against our citizens volunteering to join the Terrans' military. What other steps could we take?"

Sherazi paused for a moment. *What other steps could they take?* That was a loaded question. "Once the League finishes with the Terrans and has defeated them, they'll move on. To us. To the Matrinids. To anyone else they can conquer."

"We don't know that. The League claims it has no designs on our territory or any of the other races. Only the Terrans and any human colonies that aren't under League rule."

"You don't honestly believe an empire that relishes in expansion and preaches human purity is going to stop on our doorstep? We lack the military might to defeat their entire fleet. They know that. They'll defeat us all in detail."

"Then send the chimps more war material. Prop them up. But don't risk our sons and daughters in their war!" Ihejirika said, hissing as he did.

Sherazi whirled around and bared his teeth at Ihejirika, hissing. “Do not use dishonorable and racist language in my presence, young man. Or you will find yourself without a job!”

Ihejirika bowed his head. “I apologize, Chief Minister.”

Sherazi inclined his head, accepting the apology. Turning back toward the direction he had been walking, he decided that now, more than ever, something had to be done to change the balance of power. He had prayed, oh how he had prayed, that a path would reveal itself. This moment had been coming for years, and successive Saurian leaders had avoided the question of what to do if anything in the fight against the League of Sol. But now, the difficult decision could wait no longer. Walking up to the door leading to the briefing room, he knew it was time.

He looked at Ihejirika. “Let’s get on with it.”

AFTER A PHOTO OPPORTUNITY with President Spencer was concluded, both leaders took their place at the front of the briefing room. There were dozens of reporters from both empires present in the large meeting space. The *Lion*’s senior officers were present and seated behind both President Spencer and Chief Minister Sherazi.

As the visiting head of state, protocol dictated that Sherazi went first. “Mr. President, honored members of both the Terran Coalition and Saurian Empire’s diplomatic service, honored members of both our militaries, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to share this joint podium today,” Sherazi said, speaking into the microphone at his lectern. “I wish to honor the gallantry and sacrifice of the brave soldiers that prevented the League from killing our diplomatic team, and for their courage in the face of great

odds." The Saurian paused for a moment, his eyes sweeping the crowd and looking behind him to the command crew of the *Lion*. "I also wish to honor Major Sheila Thompson. Her actions in saving her ship are consistent with the finest traditions of not only your own military service, but of the Saurian Empire as well."

As he spoke of Sheila, his eyes rested on David. David seemed to take notice and gave a slight nod of acknowledgement and thanks. Sherazi nodded his head before continuing. "Major Thompson's sacrifice is also consistent with her beliefs, ones that are shared by many of our citizens as well as myself. There is no greater love for another than to give your life to save another. This was taught to us many thousands of years ago by our greatest prophet. That maxim was taught to you as well.

"Humans always seem to have a saying or quote that fits a given situation," he said. "One that I find myself remembering as of late is this: 'All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.'" Sherazi pursed his lips together and paused. "For far too long, I, and many of those in the Saurian Empire, have done nothing. Oh, we've sent medical supplies, a few dozen outdated ships we would have scrapped anyway, not to mention many young men and women who have more honor than their elders have defied our laws and the specter of dishonor to come and join the Coalition Defense Force in order to fight the evil that is the League of Sol."

David pondered exactly where was this going. He noted that the room had become very still. The sound of a pin dropping would have had the same effect as a grenade going off. Whatever it was, it was big.

"But here we stand, continuing to shield ourselves with words, refusing to join this noble fight, refusing to do what is right. So today, I have decided that the Saurian Empire will

no longer do nothing." Sherazi took a step from behind his podium and toward President Spencer. "Mr. President, if you will have us, I pledge to you that the Saurian Empire will join the fight against the League of Sol. Together, and with anyone else who will join us, we will unite to defeat the League wherever it may slither. We will fight, we will overcome, and we will not rest until the League has surrendered or is destroyed!"

Spencer looked as if he had been slapped. Of all the things anyone expected today, this wasn't one of them. David knew there would be problems, the least of which would be getting Saurian and Human to work together without coming to blows. But those were good problems, and ones maybe he could help figure out.

Spencer took a step from behind his podium, crossing the stage to meet Chief Minister Sherazi. Both men extended their arms and shook firmly.

"Speaking on behalf of all citizens in the Terran Coalition, we would be honored to see the Saurian Empire join us in this fight," Spencer said, his voice full of emotion.

At that point, the members of the diplomatic team, the military, and many of the reporters in the room began to applaud, as did the crew of the *Lion of Judah*.

David thought to himself that perhaps all of the pain and sacrifice had been worth it to get to this point, except for Sheila's death. It took at least thirty seconds for the crowd to quiet down, and reporters began shouting questions.

"Chief Minister Sherazi, the Saurians have stayed neutral for twenty-seven years. How will your people react to this seeming unilateral declaration of war?" a female reporter at the front of the room shouted.

"They will see the justness of our cause and rally to it," Sherazi said in a direct tone.

"And if they don't?" another reporter shouted back.

“Then I will call on anyone who disagrees to challenge me to blood combat,” Sherazi said with a small trace of smugness; he was renowned as a martial artist within the Saurian Empire.

Another reporter interrupted, “Chief Minister, how many ships will you send?”

Sherazi turned to face the man. “Aside from our home defense guard, everything we have.”

More reporters started to speak over each other, when a young woman screamed the loudest. “Mr. President! There are reports that our forces fired first against the League peace delegation; is that true?”

“Ms. Roberts, the CDF has provided direct sensor data that clearly shows the *Destruction* fired first.”

David fumed within as Spencer fielded the question. *How could anyone believe that the League was the victim*?

Not to be deterred, the young woman yelled a follow-up question before he could call on someone else. “Sensor logs can be faked, sir. How do we know that the CDF is telling the truth?”

“Young lady, do you have any proof of that allegation?”

“No, sir, just a questioning mind.”

“The facts speak for themselves. You can interview the thousands of people onboard the *Lion of Judah*, tens of thousands more on our space-based military installations, or onboard the hundreds of civilian craft that all saw the *Destruction* fire first. Next!” Spencer said, his tone briefly crossing over to anger before he resumed his normal pitch.

A reporter from Canaan News Network, a decidedly right of center news outlet, hollered out a question. “Chief Minister, why, after nearly thirty years, is the Saurian Empire joining the fight?”

Sherazi responded, “Because this is the first time the Saurians have had leadership willing to make a very difficult

decision. Joining a war isn't something that is done lightly or without consideration. In truth, we should have joined this fight many years ago."

Yet another reporter shouted out, "Bret Stevens, Galactic News Network…Mr. President, while surely this is a shot in the arm to our war effort, do you really think one victory and a new ally is enough to stem the tide of the League? Are you going to consider renewed diplomatic efforts?"

Spencer leaned forward into the podium. "Mr. Stevens, any time the League would like to surrender, we're all ears."

The same reporter then shouted a follow up. "What about a negotiated peace, Mr. President?"

"We've tried many times to reach a negotiated peace, Mr. Stevens. You know that. Everyone in the press corps knows that, and every citizen in the Terran Coalition knows that. Those attempts have failed. Perhaps after we've kicked the League out of our space and with our new allies taking the war to the League, they will want to reconsider. At that point in time, we'll address it. Next!"

A reporter at the back of the room stood to get the president's attention and Sherazi pointed to her. "Chief Minister, Mr. President, when will the *Lion of Judah* return to the front against the League?"

At that question, David shuddered. The thought of going back into combat with his mind unsettled was unappealing to say the least. He barely heard President Spencer say that operational details of the war couldn't be discussed. The rest of the press conference went by at a snail's pace for him, and when it was finally over, he and the rest of the military personnel stood as the president and the chief minister left the room first, followed by their security details.

After the reporters had left, David and the remaining senior staff from the *Lion* congregated together. He had nothing left. *I just want to go back to my bunk*, he thought.

Ruth spoke up, filling the silence. “It is far too early to end our day. Why don’t we go have a drink and toast the fallen?”

Before David could say no, Calvin interjected, “Best idea I’ve heard all day. You a transfer from the Marines, Lieutenant?”

“From a medical perspective, I think it would do us all good,” Tural said, drawing laughter from the group.

“Come on, sir,” Ruth said as she glanced at David. “You need to be around people right now, sir. We all do.”

Okay, time to put on the happy command face. “You’ve convinced me. Where’re we going?”

“How about The Ready Room?” Hanson said.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Do you own stock in that bar or something, Major?”

“No, it’s just a good place and it doesn’t rip off the military.”

“That works for me. Let’s go, people,” David said, ending the debate. *This will be good for morale, and maybe some camaraderie will help the ease the burden on my heart and on the rest of us.* They walked out together.

The group took over a section of the bar at The Ready Room, breaking up into smaller units around high-top tables to talk. Hanson, Ruth, and David gravitated together; they had been comrades in arms for the longest together and all knew Sheila well.

“There’s one thing I’m certain of,” Hanson said between sips of his beer.

“What’s that?” Ruth asked.

“Sheila would be happy we’re doing this together.”

David glanced up from his drink. “I’ll agree with that.”

“Cheer up, sir,” Ruth said as she looked at David with concern in her eyes.

“I’ll be okay. Someday,” David replied, his face a mask of emotional pain.

Watching David and Ruth, Hanson was desperate to change the subject. “How about plastering a League dreadnought on our first time at bat?”

“Did you mix in a sports metaphor?” Ruth asked, feigning disbelief.

“Uh yeah, Lieutenant.”

“It’s Ruth. We’re not on duty.”

“Right, Ruth.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “There’s a reason you don’t have a girlfriend, Hanson.”

“I’m just waiting for the right girl!”

“You’d take any girl that showed interest in you at this point.”

“That’s not true…” Hanson sputtered, and then thinking of a retort, pressed on. “Like you’re one to talk. When was the last time you went on a date?”

Ruth gave an evil smile. “The last guy I dated quit talking to me after I explained to him that my job was killing League soldiers in large numbers.”

“I’m really glad you’re on our side.”

David looked up from his drink. “You two should get a room or something.”

Hanson felt his face run hot and turn red, looking from Ruth to David. In truth, he was attracted to her but couldn’t act on it because of their positions on the ship.

Ruth laughed as his face got redder. “Oooo, I think that one hit home.”

Calvin butted into the conversation. “What’s going on here? Our engineer looks like his reactor’s about to blow.”

Even David managed a smile as Ruth, Hanson, and Calvin laughed uproariously.

Standing up, David motioned the bartender over. “I’d like to get a round of shots.”

“What can I get for you and your crew, Colonel?”

“A round of Pineapple Upside Down Cake shots for us and a shot glass with water in it.” Taking in the quizzical stares from the rest of the officers, David explained further. “That was Sheila’s favorite shot, and Colonel Amir does not drink alcohol.”

Calvin rolled his eyes. “Hey, Amir. What’s this about you not drinking alcohol? You want to start now? I’ll teach you.”

“Not drinking alcohol is a tenet of my faith.”

“Oh whatever. There’s only a few things better than blasting Leaguers. Drinking shots after blasting Leaguers, for instance,” Calvin said. “And why are you ordering some girl’s drink for us, Colonel? Get a real shot. Barkeep! A round of Four Horsemen!”

The barkeeper looked from David to Calvin, not quite sure who to answer to before David answered. “Four Horsemen it is. And a shot glass with water in it.”

The barkeeper nodded and came back a few minutes later holding a tray filled with shot glasses. David, Ruth, Hanson, Calvin, Tural, Tinetariro, Merriweather, Hammond, and Taylor all picked up a shot while Amir got the shot glass with water in it.

David raised his shot glass high. “Let us give thanks to God for the blessings we have received. Let us give thanks to our brothers and sisters in arms, and let us remember the price that is paid for the freedoms we enjoy. Those who fell were part of us. We knew them. They were brave, and they paid the ultimate price without regard for themselves. We remember them tonight that they fought and died, not in vain but in honor. Let us never forget our fallen comrades.

We knew them, we'll remember them, and they will never be forgotten!"

Forcing his lips together, David seemed to labor to avoid showing emotion. "To our fallen!" As soon as he uttered those words, he brought the shot glass up to his mouth and downed it in one gulp. The rest of them repeated in unison, "To our fallen!" before downing their drinks as well.

Feeling the liquor burn as it went down his throat, Hanson was glad he was with his brothers and sisters in arms. He was going to miss Sheila, but that was war. Reflecting on how hard it was to make and keep friends, he felt sorry for David. Losing your best friend for almost twenty years? That had to be pure hell.

But in time, the pain would heal; it had for Hanson as he lost friends along the way. After the announcement of the Saurians joining them, he thought to himself that finally they were on the road to victory. That was more than enough to buoy his spirits as they ordered another round and celebrated the life of Sheila and the rest of the fallen into the wee hours of the morning.

MacIntosh waited patiently in the office of Richard McNamara, the programming director for the Galactic News Network, which was one of the largest holo-news outfits in the Terran Coalition. An old friend from his days as a young officer, the two men had remained friends for over twenty-five years. The door swished open and Richard strode through, making his way over to Andrew and greeting him warmly.

"Andrew! So good to see you, old friend!" McNamara said loudly.

MacIntosh stood up and shook McNamara's hand warmly with a grin. "It's been too long."

As the two men took their respective seats, McNamara continued speaking. "What brings you by my office in uniform?"

MacIntosh laughed. "All business?"

"Always."

"I wanted to discuss GNN's coverage of the *Lion of Judah* and the events of the last twenty-four hours."

"I see. I'm the programming director…not our news and editorial director, Andrew."

"I realize that, but I also know you have a great deal of influence."

"Are you here to complain about the perceived bias in our news coverage?"

MacIntosh snorted. "Perceived?"

"Okay, fine. As someone who voted for President Spencer, though don't ever let that get out or I'm done here…I concede our news has a certain editorial viewpoint baked in, if you will."

"That ambush interview with Colonel Cohen being an excellent example."

"Oh please…he destroyed Leslie Sharp. I haven't seen her beaten that bad on a live broadcast in years. Once he's done blasting the League from our skies, you ought to get him to run for office. He'd be a natural."

MacIntosh laughed out loud. "Somehow, I don't ever see David Cohen as a politician."

"So what's the ask, Andrew?"

Brass tacks it is. "We just had a major win. The people have to hear it. Morale's been crap and you know it. The story has to be told in an unvarnished, pro-CDF manner."

"I don't discount that destroying Seville's flagship is a win, but there's a lot of war left to fight."

MacIntosh leaned forward in his seat. “The destruction of the *Destruction*,” he smirked at his bad pun, “isn’t what we need to play up. It’s the joining of the Saurians to our cause. That’s the game changer.”

“We’ve gotten reports that perhaps the chief minister’s comments were more symbolic.”

MacIntosh shook his head violently. “They’ve already sent dozens of warships to join us, and something to the effect of eighty percent of their fleet is slated to be here in two weeks.”

McNamara raised an eyebrow. “That’s a lot of ships.” He sighed. “Look, I want to help you. But this is a really big ask.”

“You owe me,” MacIntosh said pointedly. “I’ve never called in that favor.”

McNamara let his head sag. “You know, I’ve wondered why over the years you’ve never called it in.”

“Because I’ve never had something worth using it on before. This is it, Richard. We’re going to win, and we’ve got to have everyone onboard.”

“You’ve got to give me something to take to the news division.”

“I figured you’d say that. I know how this game works. So how about this… I’ll give GNN, and not Canaan News Network, the embedded reporter slot on the *Lion*.”

“Seriously?” McNamara asked.

“As long as it’s not Leslie Sharp. For God’s sake, at least get someone who acts fair and somewhat pro-CDF.”

There was silence in the room for more than a couple of seconds before McNamara finally spoke. “I can sell this.” He looked MacIntosh directly in the eyes. “But only if you’re absolutely sure it’s for real.”

“I’d stake my life on it.”

“Okay. I’m in. I’ll even give you veto power on the embed. Behind the scenes, of course.”

MacIntosh sat back in his chair; this was the last portion of his plan to turn morale around. He’d called in every favor he had throughout the media, cultivated throughout a career that started four years before the initial Battle of Canaan. It would all be worth it if the people of the Terran Coalition could believe in victory again. “You have a deal, Richard.” He leaned forward and extended his hand; McNamara took it and they shook warmly.

40

David had decided to stay in his quarters rather than his on-planet apartment after leaving the pub that night. He figured that there would be media types waiting to try to get a picture of him, thanks to the enormous amount of publicity that the *Lion* and her maiden voyage had generated. That, and he just wanted to be alone. He couldn't shake the feeling of depression and sadness that washed over him every time he thought of Sheila's death, even after the amazing declaration from the Saurian president. Any channel he turned on and every news post had her likeness and the story running over and over that she had saved them all. And in doing so, she had also saved the Terran Coalition from destruction.

David really didn't care for the fact that his best friend's memory was being used for war propaganda, but at least they told the truth. He took his uniform sweater off, unbuttoned his collar, and sat down at the desk. He decided to turn on his tablet and noticed that he had a video message. Clicking on it, the message opened and asked him to verify his identity. Pressing his finger on the screen, the application began to play the message.

Sheila's face appeared. "David," she began. "If you are receiving this message, well, I'm not here anymore. Oh, I know that's melodramatic, but I had to leave you something."

As she talked, David noticed that the timestamp on the message was from over six months ago, right before they had begun serving on the *Rabin* together.

"You see, you asked me something, and I couldn't be fully honest with you. You asked me why I wanted to come serve with you again. The truth is, I missed you. I missed you for so long. I remember the sadness in your eyes when I told you I was getting married to James. I had always thought you cared for me in a way that was more than friendship. I tried to encourage you to open up about it. It was only later that I realized you had closed yourself off to meaningful relationships because of how hurt you were."

Watching the video, David could barely process his emotions. He had cared for Sheila, and he had feelings for her that went beyond mere friendship. Having her likeness call him on it brought it all to the forefront. It became crystal clear to him why her death affected him so badly. He had hoped that one day the war would be over, and he'd be able to try to act on those feelings. Now that hope was gone.

"I love you," she said, beginning to cry a little in the video. "You have always inspired the best in me and in those around you. You helped me get past James' death. You also helped me believe that one day we could actually win. And I know that right now you are torn up inside. You hide it, you bury it, but I know it's there. You have to find a way to let it out, David. Your feelings will destroy you from the inside if you don't. Keep fighting for what you believe in, for what I believed in. Don't let the good that's in you be destroyed by hatred. Don't ever let it consume you. And someday, I hope that we'll see each other again on the other side. I can't

comprehend what that would be like…but I hope we do. So stop blaming yourself for my death. I know you will, but it's not your fault. Let yourself find happiness and for God's sake stop shutting yourself off to everyone around you. You can't carry the burden of the world on your shoulders." She paused for a moment. "Please try to talk to my mother. She'll be mad, but talk to her. Make her understand that I did this of my own accord, and that I stayed in the military because I felt I had to stand up and be counted." There was another pause. "I wish you and I could have grown old together. I wish we could have had a large family like you Orthodox Jews pump out," she said with a sad laugh. "Remember me, but don't dwell on the past. Wherever you are now, whatever you're doing, the Terran Coalition needs you. Keep fighting. Stay true to what you believe and those ideals you insisted the rest of us follow. Some things are just worth fighting for…and sometimes they're worth dying for." By now, tears streamed down her face. "Good bye, David. I'll always love you."

In stunned silence, David struggled to react to her words. David watched the video twice more that night before sitting back in his chair and looking up at the ceiling. Finally, when he had thought he could cry no more, the realization of Sheila's message to him, with all of its accuracy, made him cry again.

As the tears ran down David's face that evening, his mind ran back through her words while his heart ran through his emotions. First an overwhelming feeling of sadness, coupled with the bittersweet realization that they had deeply cared for one another for years rippled through him. *I've been denying it for a long time. No wonder I was so jealous when she got married. I should've said something to her, but now I'll never get the chance. What have I done? How do I ever make peace with*

the fact that she wanted to stand down, but I insisted on chasing down Seville?

THE NEXT MORNING, there was a grand ceremony to welcome home the prisoners of war rescued from the captured League freighter. The League had selected the first five thousand Coalition Defense Force and various Terran Coalition nation-state military POWs for the trip; in accordance with the POW code observed by nearly every CDF and Terran Coalition POW, they were to be repatriated only in order of capture. To avoid an unneeded riot, the League handlers had done just that, taking the first five thousand captured. Those selected had no idea it was a farce; they'd actually believed they were coming home. Reflecting on that reality, Colonel Clint Waterman, the highest-ranking POW and de facto leader of the group, adjusted his uniform while looking in a mirror. *Such a simple thing, that mirror,* he thought to himself. *But I haven't seen one in over twenty years.*

The last forty-eight hours had been extreme culture shock for all of them; first thinking they were going to die at the hands of the League guards and saved at the last moment by the Marines. Now they prepared to disembark from shuttles and be repatriated. Clint had been able to speak with his wife and children for a few minutes the night before, letting them know he was alive. While they were excited to see him, he realized that he must be a distant memory to them. In time, Clint hoped that he and the rest of his comrades in arms could reintegrate into society. He also knew that many of them had wounds that would take years to heal, both physical and mental... if they ever did.

Making his way to the front of the transport, he stood near the departure door and waited. None of the other CDF

soldiers seemed to know what to say; some attempted small talk, but how do you make small talk with a man who had been imprisoned and tortured for twenty years? Sensing their unease, he had tried to make light of the situation himself by addressing the young corporal in charge of the ramp crew. “Waiting for them to give the okay to open up the ramp, Corporal?”

“Uh, yes, sir,” the young man said hesitantly.

“I remember those days. Nothing ever seemed to happen on time. I’m just glad to be home and getting some decent grub for a change. Leaguer food tastes about as drab as you’d think it would in a communist country. Bland and slimy.”

The corporal laughed, lightening up some. “I can’t imagine, sir, but I don’t even like eating MREs,” referring to meals ready to eat, the combat rations of the CDF. “I’m just happy to get three hots and a cot when I’m deployed.”

“I know what you mean, Corporal. I know what you mean.”

Finally, the door to the transport opened and the ramp descended. This particular transport only had three hundred POWs on it. As thousands of family members had thronged the base, they had to manage how many people were on the flight line to avoid injuries. As the highest-ranking POW, it was Clint’s duty to walk down the ramp first. With difficulty due to old wounds, including having both of his legs broken during interrogation sessions, he slowly made his way down the ramp on his own power. As he reached the bottom, General Andrew MacIntosh, the Secretary of Defense, and President Spencer were there to greet him. Exchanging salutes with all three, he realized that the flag of Terran Coalition was not only flying high on a nearby flagpole, but that the crowds waved both CDF and Terran Coalition flags proudly while they cheered. Clint noticed that Colonel

Demood stood with another group of officers; he assumed they were his crewmates from the *Lion of Judah*.

Clint turned toward the flag, waving in the wind on the nearest flagpole he could see and raised his hand to his brow, snapping off a crisp salute. He then turned to face a single camera and a microphone that had been placed at the bottom of the ramp, where he read a short statement.

"On behalf of my fellow prisoners of war and on behalf of those who paid the ultimate price, I would like to thank all the members of the Coalition Defense Force responsible for us being here today, and specifically Colonel Demood and Terran Coalition Marine Corps. Without their heroic efforts, none of us would have survived. It has been an honor, both for myself and those who have been held captive with me, to serve our country, even after what we endured. We will now devote ourselves to helping in any way that we can to defeat the League of Sol once and for all. God Bless the Terran Coalition!"

As he finished speaking, his voice cracked with emotion as he repeated the often-invoked phrase "God Bless the Terran Coalition." President Spencer embraced him, and then shook his hand warmly before Clint took his position to the side of General MacIntosh as the next POW in line walked down the ramp. For the next two hours, men and women walked down the ramp, exchanging salutes, most barely able to walk. As the final POW—a lady Clint had gotten to know briefly who had been captured eighteen years prior—walked away, President Spencer spoke. "Colonel, let's get you to the nearest rehab hospital. I'm sure you will want to be able to enjoy retirement at one hundred percent," he said with a smile.

Clint turned to look at Spencer straight in the eye. "Sir, I have no plans to retire. As soon as I am medically cleared, I intend to rejoin the fight."

Spencer looked shocked. “Are you certain, Colonel?”

“Yes, sir. I do want to spend some time with my family, but this is my fight too. I’m not walking away from it, not while I still have something to offer.”

Spencer nodded and extended his hand, which Clint took and shook. “Good luck, Colonel. Godspeed.”

“Thank you, sir,” Client responded and walked away.

As he did, he overheard Spencer comment to General MacIntosh behind him, “Andrew, as long as men and women like that fight for our cause, there will always be hope.”

David strode into a small interview room within the Terran Coalition’s Intelligence center a day after the ceremony to repatriate the POWs rescued from the League freighter. He was now simply an automated being; he went from point A to point B on autopilot, keeping a flat expression on his face, his mind focused on his work as to not allow the emotional turmoil deep inside from boiling to the surface. He’d come to the intelligence center to speak to Carl Jenner, the League’s diplomatic minister.

CDF Intelligence had tried to debrief him for several days, but he had refused to speak to anyone except David about more than his name, position, and identification number. General MacIntosh had ordered him to make himself available to the spooks, so here he was, walking into the interview room like it was another day at the office.

It took some time to bring Minister Jenner to the interview room, time which David took to think about why the man would want to talk to him. *I wonder why he wants to talk to me. Was it the civil conversation we had over dinner? Maybe he was being honest when he said he wanted peace. Was it possible that the man had been hoodwinked?* David at least

considered that possibility; after all, who in their right mind would consent to be the patsy for a scheme such as the one the League tried to pull.

The door opening interrupted David's thoughts. The security detail of two military policemen led Carl in, who, once he was seated, left the room to stand guard just outside the door. David stood on instinct. "Minister Jenner."

"Colonel."

David extended his hand to Jenner, who looked at it for a moment before shaking. Taking a seat, he stared at the League official. "I'm not sure why you asked me here, Minister."

"I thought you might understand."

"Understand what?"

"That I had no idea what Seville and those damn warmongers planned."

David sat back in his chair, pondering the man's comments and expression. "Minister, I don't think it matters what I believe."

"I'm no longer a minister, not that I would want that title back again. Please, call me Carl."

David's brow furrowed as he thought. "Very well. I still don't understand what you hope I can accomplish."

"You have to convince them I was sincere, and that the faction I represented in the State Security Committee was sincere as well, Colonel."

"Why? So we won't execute you for a war crime?" David shot back, the cynicism that had settled into his soul breaking through.

Jenner's face turned to a grimace. "Do you truly think that little of me, Colonel? I remind you that while you may have lost your father to this war, I lost both of my sons. I must live with that until I die. Parents shouldn't outlive their children." His voice rose to nearly a shout.

David considered for a moment. *Perhaps that was a low blow*. All evidence indicated that Jenner was simply used by the League military to get what they wanted; a knockout blow on Canaan. "I'm sorry, Carl," he said, using Jenner's first name for the first time. "I don't believe you knew what was going on. I'm not myself. This latest battle claimed the life of someone very near and dear to me."

"I would assume that is Major Thompson?"

David nodded sadly. "Yes. I think I'm pretty lost without her."

"That's how I felt after my second boy was killed. Empty. Lost. I decided that this madness had to end, so I started trying to find others that felt as I did."

"I'll concede that is a noble endeavor, Carl, but you can't be naive enough to believe everything that the League puts out. Sure, Earth is a utopia, but it's a utopia because it strips resources, food, and supplies from the outer ring planets in the League."

To David's great surprise, Jenner nodded. "You are mostly correct, Colonel. The oligarchs have over time replaced our socialism with their control. We need serious reforms to get back to our ideals that all are equal and that we ensure, as a society, that all are treated equally."

"So you are running into the problem that some pigs are more equal than others?" David asked.

"I'm afraid I don't follow. What do pigs have to do with it?"

David chuckled. "A book we all have to read as school children from Earth's 20th century. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. It's an allegory about the evil of socialism. You should read it… it's a very eye-opening read pertaining to what happens when a group of people decide they know what's best for others."

“I would rather have a society where we surrender some rights than have one like the Terran Coalition where the poor beg for scraps and citizens aren’t guaranteed basic necessities.”

“There’s a job for anyone who wants it in the Terran Coalition, Carl. Unemployment across all of our planets is less than four percent. It’s true… some struggle, but that’s why we have robust charity organizations centered around our religious intuitions. Judaism, for instance, operates Jewish Community Centers across every planet in the Terran Coalition.”

“Are only Jews welcome to obtain help there?”

“Anyone is welcome regardless of what faith you hold, including none at all. The Terran Coalition collectively takes care of our citizens; we just do it without overwhelming government presence. The government has a safety net for the neediest. Private charity does the rest.”

“I find it hard to believe that it’s possible for private charity and minimal government intervention to work across a large scale.”

“Then perhaps once you are released from custody, you’d allow me to give you a tour of some of our planets and not just Canaan… but also our border worlds, which are still quite undeveloped. You can see how it works for yourself.”

Jenner snorted. “While I would gladly take you up on that offer… I don’t think I’m ever getting out of here, Colonel.”

“It will take a while, and you will be questioned repeatedly. But if you tell the truth, they will let you out. We’re more interested in justice than retribution.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Yes, I do. It’s one of the reasons I get up every morning and put on this uniform.”

“I hope you’re right. I still want to try to bring peace to the Terran Coalition and League of Sol. Despite our

differences, we've got to find a way to live together. If we don't, this war will destroy us all."

A knock on the door informed David that the allotted time for the discussion with Jenner was up. "I'm afraid they've come to collect you, Carl."

Jenner stood as the door swung open and the security detail strode in. "Thank you for coming, Colonel. Please pass on what I've asked to your superiors."

"I will. Good luck and Godspeed."

Jenner inclined his head and was led out by the security detail. A few minutes later, David was debriefed on his conversation with Minister Jenner. Fumbling his way through the discussion, David just wanted to get out of there and go back to his quarters. The funerals for Sheila and those who had fallen were scheduled for the next day. He had to figure out how to get through that and carry on. The question was how he could find his way back to duty when he was so lost in the pain of his emotions.

41

Kenneth Lowe looked across his desk at the small group of people in his office onboard the *Lion*, his second in command, Joshua Carter, and several team leads, including Harold Billings. With a defeated tone to his voice, Kenneth addressed his team. "I'm afraid I was asked by Mr. Casey to tender my resignation, folks."

There was a pregnant pause in the room as the rest of them looked at one another. Helen Thames, the project controller, was the first to speak. "That's not fair, sir. We all volunteered."

"Nevertheless, I disobeyed a direct order. I know I've said to all of you, more than once, if you find yourself in a position where you lack confidence in your chain of command, the only recourse is to resign. I had been prepared to do so prior to his request."

"That's bullshit," Harold blurted out in his usual no-nonsense tone.

"Regardless, it is what it is. For several years now, we've done our best to run this program the right way and take care of those men and women out there fighting for us. For me, at least, that fight is over. I'm sure I will end up somewhere else. I need all of you to refocus your efforts to

keep this ship operational, get it upgraded, and help it become the fighting machine we all know it is capable of being. It has been an honor and a privilege to work side-by-side with you these last four years." Kenneth paused for a moment and turned to Joshua. "Now it's on you to keep it going, Josh."

Joshua shook his head. "I have no desire to continue without you, sir."

"While that means a great deal to me, this program must go on. It's bigger than any one of us. Even if every person assigned to this project walked out, the only people it would hurt are the crew of this ship, and the citizens of the Terran Coalition, including ourselves. In times like this, we must all sacrifice. One defense contractor's career is a small price to pay. I'm willing to pay it, with a smile on my face."

As he finished his statement, the screen he had attached to his tablet began to blink, indicating a vidlink. Briefly looking at the incoming request, Kenneth realized it was from Margaret Lee. *This should be interesting*. He made a shush sound to the room before accepting the call.

"Hello, Ms. Lee."

"Hello, Mr. Lowe. How are you doing today?"

"I'm preparing to write my resignation letter, ma'am."

"I see. At whose request?"

"Mr. Casey requested it before the *Lion of Judah* returned to space dock, ma'am. Given that I disobeyed a direct order and I have no confidence in Mr. Casey's ability to lead, I felt it was the best course of action."

There was a hiccup in the video feed; when it blinked back on, Margaret was smiling, "While I understand your respect for the chain of command, Kenneth…this isn't the military. Your actions were exceedingly risky, but you made the right call. I don't want mindless automatons working for me. I want living, breathing, thinking people that are willing and

able to make difficult judgment calls when needed. By all accounts, your actions, coupled with that of the military crew of the *Lion*, helped make good on a nasty situation, and quite possibly saved the Terran Coalition."

Kenneth shook his head. "Ma'am, all we did was work on some computer systems. Mr. Uzun deserves any real credit for joining the rescue mission for the POWs."

"Modesty can sometimes be a bad thing in the corporate world, Kenneth. Let me put this a different way to you. You gambled. You won. SSI won too. Now we're looking at a three-billion-credit contract that won't even be put out for bid. Consider your resignation rejected."

Kenneth tried to interject, as he was going to tell her he wouldn't work for Stephen Casey any longer, but she spoke over him. "I'm also removing you from Stephen's group. You will now report directly to me, and I am promoting you to director."

Kenneth was stunned into silence for a moment. "Uh, yes, ma'am."

"Do you think you could join me for a meeting tomorrow morning? I'd like to go over your new duties, and how I expect you to integrate into my team."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course. What time?"

"Ten AM would be fine, in my office."

"Yes, ma'am, I will see you then."

"Good day, Kenneth."

"Godspeed, Ms. Lee."

The connection cut off abruptly, and for a moment, Kenneth said nothing. Deep down, he still thought he should resign because of the death of Uzun. Contractors weren't supposed to be killed in combat; they weren't supposed to fight. From a logical perspective, Kenneth knew the man had volunteered, and that his sacrifice saved thousands of lives. That didn't make it any less hard to deal with the fact that

Uzun wouldn't have been there if not for Kenneth asking for volunteers. Raising his head and looking at his team, he saw smiles and a few happy tears.

Helen was the first to speak. "Score one for common sense."

"I didn't see that coming," Kenneth said.

Joshua reached over the desk and slapped Kenneth's arm. "Sometimes the good guys do finish first, sir."

Kenneth cracked a smile. "I guess I'd better unpack my boxes and get back to work."

"Yeah, and then we're going to go wet down your promotion, Mr. Director," Kevin said.

Joshua laughed. "Let's go with El Director. It sounds more ominous."

Kenneth smirked. "But I'm a teddy bear! That makes me sound like a tin pot dictator from one of the neutral worlds allied with the League!"

There were chuckles throughout the room; Kenneth was silent for a moment. "Thank you all for standing with me. At least we get a few more months to do this right."

"Here, here!" Harold said.

"Okay, back to work everyone! Gather the team at 6 PM; happy hour is on me."

David paced around his day cabin, brooding. The funerals for Sheila and the rest of the fallen from the battle would occur in the afternoon, but he couldn't bring himself to stand watch until then. *Better not to be seen on the bridge like this. I don't want to shake the confidence of my crew.* He had a pre-arranged video conference with General MacIntosh to discuss the *Lion*'s upcoming assignment and her new XO. That last part really got under his skin. Sheila wasn't even in

the ground yet, but the military had to assign a new XO. From a logical perspective, he got it. But from an emotional response perspective, it made him raw with rage.

The tablet beeped, reminding him it was time to connect to the video conference. David pulled up the application and entered his security code, General MacIntosh's face appearing on his tablet a moment later.

"Thank you for joining me, Colonel," MacIntosh's voice rang through the speakers on the tablet.

"Of course, sir."

"How are you holding up?"

"As best as can be expected, sir," David replied. In reality, he was a mass of emotion, but that wasn't the kind of thing he could tell his commanding officer.

"We're going to be sending you back to the front rather quickly. Is your ship ready for deployment?"

"It will be, sir. We do have some personnel gaps that need to be addressed, specifically in our Marine detachment and embarked fighter wings," David avoided mentioned the XO position.

"Colonels Demood and Amir will be getting topped off with new personnel before you depart. It is my intention to have the *Lion* perform around-the-clock shakedown activities for two weeks, then join the vanguard of our drive to push the League out of our space." MacIntosh paused for a moment. "I've also been reviewing potential XOs for you."

"It will be good to get back into the fight, sir."

"The Joint Chiefs, SecDef, and President Spencer are unanimous in their belief that the *Lion*'s XO should be a Saurian."

"I see, sir," David said. *Great, Sheila's position gets turned into a PR stunt.*

"Look, I get that this is hard. You have to understand that the alliance with the Saurians must stick. Period, full stop.

It's the only way we win this war in anything like a reasonable amount of time. Or for that matter, win it at all. I'm going to send you the best Saurian I can find. The guy I have in mind completed an exchange program rotation with the CDF, so he'll at least understand how we do things. I expect you to treat him well and integrate him into your crew. Do I make myself clear, Colonel?"

"Crystal, sir."

MacIntosh leaned forward toward the camera. "David, I know the last few days have been hell for you. I'm not discounting that. But you've got to put it aside and get back to work. Try to gain some closure today. We've all laid too many good friends into the ground, but there's a real chance that now we can at least honor their memory by winning this war. You've got to take that hope, grab hold of it, nurture it."

David forced himself to reply. "Yes, sir. Working on it."

"Good. I'll see you this afternoon. Take care and Godspeed."

The tablet video link disconnected, leaving him staring at a blank screen. David sat and thought about MacIntosh's words; he knew that from a logical perspective, they were on point. Logic however, failed him. The deep depression that swept over him simply couldn't be brushed away with positive thoughts.

David forced himself to stay on task for the rest of the morning, working through personnel transfers and reviewing requests for additional equipment and supplies that required his signature. When his communicator reminded him it was 1200 hours, he left his office and made his way back to his cabin to prepare for the funerals later that afternoon.

DAVID FELT COMPLETELY LOST, gazing across a sea of polished white marble crosses, Stars of David, crescents and stars, and assorted other tombstones. Determined to honor his best friend, he stood with many other mourners, including Ruth, Hanson, Calvin, Tinetariro, Tural, Amir, and Hammond. Sheila had been turned into a Coalition-wide hero, and her funeral was evidence of that fact. President Spencer was in attendance, and many of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were with him. He thought to himself that he couldn't care less about how much brass attended the funeral. All he wanted to do was honor his best friend and the woman he never allowed himself to express that he loved. Now that it was too late, all he wanted to do was just be able to talk to her one last time, tell her that he loved her, and try to find some way to make it all right again.

The Coalition Defense Force has pulled out all the stops, David thought to himself as a caisson drawn by a team of four horses came into view, coming down the dusty road through the cemetery. A riderless horse, the symbol of a fallen leader, followed it. As the caisson came to a stop, the honor guard approached it, exchanging salutes with the officer in charge and the chaplain. He watched as the casket team removed the casket with slow military precision. The chaplain then led the way to the gravesite followed by the honor guard, then Sheila's family, and finally, the rest of the mourners.

This was the third funeral David had attended today, the first two being for crewmembers who died on the *Lion* and Hadi Uzun. There had been tears at those services, but now, David was literally beginning to shut down emotionally. He kept going back to *Why? Why her?* Logically, he knew that Sheila made a decision not to sacrifice someone else. Part of him wished that she had, but he also knew that the very thing that made her unwilling to sacrifice another was what he loved so much about her.

David's thoughts continued to wander as the honor guard sat the casket down next to the freshly dug grave. Sheila's family, including her mother and father as well as her brother, was seated first. David was one of the last to sit after the rest of the *Lion*'s senior staff had taken their seats on the back row.

The honor guard stepped back and off to the side, coming to parade rest, while the chaplain stepped up and spoke to the mourners.

"We come here today to mourn the passing of a young woman full of life. Not just lost to a random act of chance, but a life snuffed out by an all-consuming war," the chaplain began.

"I know that looking around the people here today, I'm not the only one that asks why. I'm not the only one that looks up at the sky and asks over and over why God allows the horrible things that happen to continue. The pain and anguish that Sheila's family, friends, and colleagues are enduring are altogether too common. There is almost no one in our land that hasn't been touched by this war and by loss from it.

"In the book of Job, when Job finds out that his children have died, it says that Job stood up and tore his robe in grief, then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God. Job said that the Lord gave me everything I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord."

The chaplain paused for a moment and glanced from side to side of the crowd. "Many times, we simply move on from our grief, lacking the time to process it, and we make ourselves busy so that we forget. But Job isn't telling us to do that. Indeed, most of the book of Job is him mourning and challenging God as to that all-important question…why."

Why is the question. Where is the justice in this? Why does God allow so many horrible things to happen? He claims to be just,

and that if His people, who are called by His name, will humble themselves and pray that He will deliver them. Why hasn't that happened?

"Our grief is something we must process. It is something we must endure. Some of us will move on more quickly than others, some will grieve for a long time. Those of us who finish our mourning before the rest must not grow impatient with those who don't. Grief affects us all in different ways. Today we need to remember that Major Sheila Thompson was many things. A daughter, a warrior, a friend. She modeled the things that are the best in us. And our entire world is a little bit dimmer now that she is gone.

"I know that most of you here today have served, and that you all understand the idea of chain of command. Those of us who have been in the military understand that if we fail to follow orders, communication will break down, battles will dissolve into chaos, and the end result will be more lives lost. The same is true of believers. If we do not follow the orders found in the Bible, so too will our lives descend into chaos, and instead of lives, our souls will be lost. We must remain faithful and dedicated to the cause of Jesus Christ and what is just.

"I charge you all that as you leave this place today, remember the sacrifice of Sheila Thompson. Remember the sacrifice of all those who have gone before, and those that will undoubtedly follow. Some of you here may yet make that ultimate sacrifice. Know that as we stand with one voice, with one spirit, and with one mind, we are part of something larger than ourselves. Our suffering is for those we protect, and it is something that I, and I believe many of those who serve with me, take pride in doing. Not the kind of pride that says, 'look at me, I did this.' But the pride that comes from being a part of something bigger and better than yourself. Sheila Thompson had that pride, and she gave freely of

herself so that others might live. She should serve as an inspiration to us all.

"Let us pray." As heads bowed across the gathered mourners, the chaplain continued. "Dear Lord, we ask You to accept the soul of Sheila Thompson into Your loving care. We ask You to minister to her family and friends, and we ask You to heal them and heal our nation. In Your name we pray, Amen."

David bowed his head out of respect but was lost in his own thoughts. *It's so easy to just chalk it all up to God's will. But why does He let this continue to happen?*

The honor guard stepped up to the casket, and the officer in charge requested that the mourners stand for rendering of honors. David stood and took a parade rest stance. The sergeant that led the honor guard commanded, "Present, arms!"

Gleaming and polished antique rifles snapped up to the port arms position, the rifles resting against their shoulders. "Aim!" the sergeant shouted, and moving as one, the honor guard pointed the rifles at the sky. "Fire!" A volley rang out, followed by another, then a third.

An unseen bugler played the notes to "Taps," and as Sheila's family sat, the honor guard folded the flag that draped her casket. It was all too much for David; tears streamed down his face. He nearly broke into sobs but managed to control himself enough not to do so. As the soldiers completed folding the flag into its neat little triangle, the sergeant, with slow and precise movements, presented it to the officer in charge of the ceremony. With deliberate steps, he walked to stand directly in front of Sheila's mother before leaning down and presenting her with the flag. David could hear her crying as she took it from him.

The honor guard marched away, along with the caisson and the riderless horse. For a few minutes afterwards, the chaplain consoled Sheila's parents, especially her mother, who was clearly in extreme grief. David hung back with the rest of the *Lion*'s command staff, waiting for the service to end. His ministering complete, the chaplain announced that the service was finished; the dignitaries and friends of the family began to walk away from the gravesite.

David looked toward Sheila's mother and realized he would rather go into battle without a weapon than face her right now. In Sheila's recording, she had implored him to talk to her mother, so he steeled himself to do it. Forcing his shoulders back, David walked with purpose up to the family and addressed them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Thompson."

"You must be David," Sheila's mother replied.

"Yes, ma'am. David Cohen."

"Sheila said a lot about you over the years."

David's eyes filled with tears. "I wanted to tell you how sorry I am."

"I never wanted her to go down this path. I didn't want her to spend a lifetime in the military."

"I believe Sheila, if she was here, would tell you that she wanted to make a difference, and that service to the CDF was how she made that difference."

"Did she make a difference? Did her death matter? Was it worth it?" The last few words were said at a higher pitch, and David could sense the anger behind them.

David paused, not entirely sure how to respond. In truth, he didn't quite believe Sheila's death was worth it, but that was colored by how raw the loss of her was. Inside a dark corner of his heart, there was a part of him that wished someone else had made the sacrifice that day, not her. "Sheila made a difference every day, ma'am," he finally said.

“I’ve seen few people with more dedication to the cause. She was my best friend in this galaxy. Was her death worth it? Did it matter? Yes, it mattered. She saved the ship. She saved us all. Do I wish every minute that it wasn’t her that did it? Yes. But she did what she believed was right. That’s one of the things I loved about her.”

“You’re alive because of her?”

“Yes,” David replied.

Sheila’s mother closed her eyes for a moment. “Then make sure you do something with her gift. Because it came at a very high cost.” Crying, she turned away.

David stood there for a minute until Ruth and the rest of the senior staff got his attention and helped him away from the gravesite. Just wanting to be alone, he took his leave of them and began to walk down the dusty path away from the grave and back toward civilization.

Calvin walked up the driveway to his home, looking up at the Terran Coalition flag raised high on the flagpole in the yard. He reflected for a moment on how much he loved the flag and the ceremonies around it. He had always planned to enlist his children, once he had some, to assist him in raising and lowering the flag each day. Until then, he just kept it lighted. He had been worried the entire trip home what his wife would have to say to him, but it turned out, he shouldn’t have been. Before he was halfway up the driveway, the front door flew open and Jessica ran out with tears of joy in her eyes. He quickened his pace to meet her in the middle, embraced her, and they kissed each other passionately.

“I’m sorry for what I said, baby,” she said to him softly. “I can’t tell you how proud of you I am.”

Calvin stared into her eyes. “Unless you just have something for a man in uniform…”

She laughed at his lame attempt at humor.

“I’ve got to ask you what changed, because you were pretty upset with me.”

“I’ve seen interview after interview on the holonets from the families of the POWs your team rescued. Now I know why you had to be there. God wanted you in that place, so you could save them.”

“It wasn’t me, baby; it was all of us.”

“You led them. You gave them confidence and courage. I’ve seen you do it with all these kids that you’ve been training.”

“So you’re okay with me staying in?”

“I’m not happy about it, but I see now it’s where you are supposed to be. It’s your calling, and I’ll be okay. I had my eggs frozen for a reason, and we can have a child whenever you are ready. So, you see this through, and then we can have our family.”

Calvin thought for a moment about how selfless she was being, and it made him love her all the more. “I’ll make it up to you. I promise. But for now, how about you let me show you how much I missed you?”

His wife kissed him playfully and called after him as she darted toward the house, “If you can catch me!”

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David's quarters were dark as he lay in bed considering the events of the day. It was simply too much for him to process, laying Sheila to rest with the other fallen. At the same time, planning to re-enter combat affected him in ways he didn't expect or even understand. He was a mere automaton plodding along; his soul was crushed and he felt trapped in the depths of despair and hopelessness. After what seemed to him like hours of tossing and turning, he finally fell into a restless sleep.

Most nights, he'd have a dream or two that he might remember for a moment when he awoke, and occasionally, he'd remember something vividly, but he never had a dream quite like this one. It was almost as if he was conscious when he found himself transported to a field of green grass as far as the eye could see. The sun shined down on him as a gentle breeze blew through the grass. Looking out across the field, David felt peace he couldn't explain flow over him like a river. Suddenly, he heard a woman's voice. Not just any woman's voice, but Sheila's.

"David, I've missed you," she said, clear as if she was standing beside him on the ship.

Turning to his right, he saw Sheila standing beside him in a white sundress. In stunned amazement, he managed to get out, "But…you're gone."

"My body is dead, but my soul isn't. I'm still here with you."

David raised an eyebrow. "This is all in my head. I must be having some whale of a dream."

"No, not a dream. Something else, something you needed."

David took her hand in his and squeezed it. It felt firm, and moreover, it felt *real*. *Of course it feels real. It's a construct of my mind.* "And what does my subconscious think I need?"

"God thought you needed encouragement," she said without a trace of hesitation or irony.

"HaShem? You're telling me you met him?" David asked.

Sheila laughed softly. "Yes. I met all three of them. David, you are so broken right now." She squeezed his hand tightly. "You have to get past your grief in order to live on."

"I don't know how to… I'm lost and I know my actions and orders caused you to die," David admitted, looking down at her hands. "I never acknowledged the feelings I had for you. When I got the recording that you left for me, it forced me to confront my reality. I know you left it to communicate your feelings to me and encourage me, but it broke my heart to the core."

Sheila put her other hand under his chin and gently lifted it up to her eyes. "I never wanted that. I loved you, David…I still do, it's just different now. I'm different. I'm nowhere, but I'm everywhere at the same time. It's truly wondrous."

"What in the world are you talking about?" David asked.

"Jews believe in heaven, right?"

"Yes, though not quite in the same way as Christians do."

"Well, I can only explain it this way. When my body died in space, one moment, I closed my eyes and hoped there was

something more. The next moment, I opened them and I was in this sea of white light. God was there. He took me into this place. It's unlike anything I can describe with words; you have to experience it to understand it."

"Well, since every human dies, I'll get to experience it someday, perhaps," David said softly.

"Why wouldn't you?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"Sheila, when I look at my hands, I see blood. Blood of thousands of people that I've killed through direct action, through orders, and through inaction. I close my eyes and I see the innocents I know I've killed over the last seventeen years looking at me. I can't escape them. I am consumed by hatred for the League, most of all for what I've become...a damn killing machine!" By the end, David was sobbing.

"God doesn't blame you for that," she said. "He loves you, He loves all of us. Even the League."

David's face clouded over. "Why would He love the League? They try to kill anyone who worships his name. They've murdered billions of people!"

"Because God wants everyone to repent and serve Him, even Admiral Seville," she said earnestly.

"Seville's the worst of them all!" David nearly shouted. "The man has single handedly helped kill over one hundred million men, women, and children! He belongs in Hell if it exists!" As Jews didn't believe in the concept of Hell as a Christian did, David made a rather strong point to her.

"That's not for you to decide, David," Sheila said sadly. "You've got to let this go. It's destroying you. Hating the League, hating Seville, that does nothing but eat you up inside and bring you further apart from God. God is love, David. Hate is evil."

David angrily tore his hand out of hers. "The Sheila I know wouldn't lecture me on forgiving Seville," he said coldly.

“I would and have,” Sheila responded evenly as she walked around to get in his line of sight. “David, if you can’t forgive Seville, that’s okay. Ask God to help you. But if you hold on to it, you will become just like him! The pain you feel, the hurt you feel, the loss you feel, it’s all a symptom of a larger problem. Let go of the hate. God is there; He’s a still, small voice. Don’t shout him down! Let him help you.”

“Evil must be opposed. You used to tell me that. It’s our job to stop evil.”

“It is our job to stop evil where we can, but it’s also our job to stop evil from entering our hearts. You think God is out here by himself? For good to exist, evil must exist. That means that God has an opposing force. I call it Satan. Satan will do anything to tempt us, to turn us away from Him.”

“Jews don’t believe in Satan.”

“That’s nice,” Sheila said with a slight smirk on her face. “Somebody said the best trick Satan ever pulled was convincing people he didn’t exist. I think that’s true.”

David turned his head away. “I couldn’t save you, Sheila. I couldn’t save any of them. I don’t know how to live with that. I failed. I failed when seventy-eight men and women under my command were killed because of my orders back on the *Rabin*. It should’ve been me. Not you. Not them. Me.”

Sheila stepped up and grabbed both of his arms, “Stop it, David Cohen!” she shouted as she shook him. “You didn’t fail. You did the best you could. God asks no more of you than that, nor do your fellow soldiers. Stop blaming yourself!”

David’s shoulders sagged as he slumped forward. “I should just accept it?”

“You ask God to give you the ability to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to do the things that you can, and wisdom to tell the difference, and you never stop doing your best.”

For several seconds, David sat in silence. All the shame, guilt, and helplessness he felt boiled to the surface as he fell to his knees, sobbing as he looked up at the sky. Sheila knelt beside him and held him tightly.

"It's okay, David. Let it out," she coaxed.

As David sat and sobbed, Sheila held him as he worked to compose himself. "I'm sorry, Sheila. I don't want anyone to know what's really going on inside of me."

"I know, and that's no way to go through life. Let me show you something." She took his hand, and after a moment, they were in a different place. The two of them flew over fields of people; tens of thousands of them.

"Do you see those people, David?"

"Who are they?" he asked, marveling at how they had traveled.

"They're the people you've saved throughout your life. And not only those, the children they had, and the families you saved. You've touched hundreds of thousands of people."

Another moment and they were back in the field, sitting together. "That's a neat trick," David said, cracking a small smile.

"Yeah, it's interesting," she answered with a grin.

"Why are you showing me all of this?"

"Because you have miles to go, David Cohen. Because God needs you. You have a purpose in His plan. You have to answer the call," she said, caressing his hands.

"Somebody else can answer that call. I've fought the good fight."

"If you abandon your post, why would anyone else stand and fight?" Sheila asked. "You're the hero of Canaan. The man that defeated Seville. If you quit now, you will doom us all to darkness for ten generations. You don't get to quit,

David. You've never quit in your life. The David Cohen I loved never quits."

"You make it sound so easy."

"I gave my life for the cause. All you have to do is live for the cause."

"I don't know how to keep going, Sheila."

"One day at a time, one step at a time."

"That sounds a bit trite."

"I won't deny that," she said with a smile. "But it's still true. It's how I kept going. Now it's your turn. I'll be here watching out for you. God is with you. He is your protector, He will support you, and He will fight for all of us as long as we humble ourselves and call on His name."

David looked down, fighting through waves of emotion. At the core of his soul, he knew she was right. There was a fight to wage, not just of the Terran Coalition against the League of Sol, but of good versus evil. Maybe she was right; maybe there was a higher power that supported evil and opposed God. That wasn't something that David could figure out today.

"It's going to take me a while to put aside the hate for the League and Seville."

"But you're going to try, aren't you?" Sheila said.

"I am, but I'm going to give it to HaShem. Because He can do immeasurably more than I ever can," David said with a smile.

Sheila stood and helped David up as well. "And that is the David Cohen I know and love."

"As for the rest, I'll keep fighting until I can fight no more."

"I'll be here when you arrive someday," she said softly to him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Knowing my luck, I'll still be single."

Sheila laughed. “I very much hope that’s not the case. You deserve to be loved while you’re in this universe. Besides, you cook a good steak. Men that can cook are a hot commodity.”

It was David’s turn to laugh, and then smile sadly. “I miss you so much.”

After a moment, Sheila leaned in and kissed him passionately. “I miss you too, David. Until we meet again someday. I love you.”

David woke up with a start in his bed. He jerked up so quickly, he nearly hit his head. Sitting there for a few minutes, he remembered every detail from the dream. Or was it something more? He couldn’t be sure. *It felt so real, and now it’s like a memory of something that actually happened*. As he lay back down, he didn’t sleep the rest of the night. Going over and savoring every moment with Sheila, he felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off him and that something very dark was gone from his heart. Realizing that he finally had some measure of peace, he prayed repeatedly that God would forgive him and bless his soul. Resolving to find a way to exorcise the hate from his soul, he spent the rest of the night praying and thinking on how to grow into the man Sheila told him he could be.

Following the conclusion of his normal morning ritual, David resolved to visit Dr. Tural to try to make sense of what he had experienced the night before. He was not quite sure what had happened, but upon the reflection of the rest of the night, he was sure it was something more than simply a dream. Tugging his duty sweater down, he strode into the medical bay, which was empty at 0600. Walking through the quiet facility, he made his way to Dr. Tural’s office to find

the doctor behind his desk. He knocked on the open hatch frame to announce himself. “Good morning, Doctor. May I come in?”

Tural stood from his desk. “Of course, Colonel. How may I help you today?”

David stepped into the room and closed the hatch behind him. “I need to discuss something with you, Doctor.” He paused for a moment, suddenly realizing that whatever he talked over with the doctor might end up in his personnel file. “But before I do, I need your word this will not go into my medical record.”

Tural raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I can make a blanket promise to that effect, Colonel, if whatever you share with me impacts your ability to command this ship.”

“I’m certain you’ve noticed my…cold, emotional state the last few days.”

“I’d be lying to you if I said I hadn’t, Colonel. You’ve absorbed a great deal of emotional trauma. I would strongly recommend you visit a counselor.”

David pursed his lips, considering what he was about to say. “Doctor, I had an experience last night, one that I can’t explain. I was hoping you could help me understand it.”

“If I can, I will. What happened?”

For the next ten minutes, David explained to Tural what he believed was the vision he received the night before. “In conclusion, Doctor, I’ve never had a dream like that in my life. It was like I was really there, like it actually happened.”

Tural wore a questioning yet inscrutable look on his face during David’s entire explanation, rarely interrupting. “Colonel, if I may…I’m not sure what use I can be to you. While the Quran quite clearly states that dreams can be authentic messages from Allah…I’m not sure what you’re looking for from me.”

“I was hoping you could run some tests on my brain and tell me if I’m okay, Doctor.”

“I can run a baseline scan of your brain easily, but I’m not sure what I’d be looking for,”

“Let’s just make sure it’s in good working order, then,” David replied with a smile.

Tural stood and gestured to the door. “Very well. Let’s get you onto an examination bed.”

After he led David over to the bed, it took a few minutes for the scan to be completed. He had to sit completely still and wait for the laser to pass back and forth over his head several times. At the conclusion of the scan, they returned to Tural’s office. Tural pulled the scan images up on his personal tablet and reviewed them.

He looked up at David. “I will admit, these results are interesting, Colonel.” He turned the tablet around and showed it to him. Pointing to a specific section, he continued. “Do you see this here? That’s your hippocampus, or the portion of the brain that governs much of the memory functions.”

David looked at the image; he had no idea what he was looking at. “You must forgive me, Doctor. I have no idea why that image would be interesting to you.”

“Of course… well, see how it’s lighting up? That indicates that you’ve made many new memories. That’s not something I would expect to see after you were asleep most of the night having a dream.”

David furrowed his brow. “Does that mean you see some evidence to back up the idea that it wasn’t just a dream?”

Tural shook his head. “Colonel, I’d be lying to you if I said there was irrefutable scientific evidence that you had what amounts to an out-of-body spiritual experience.” He spread his hands. “Is the fact that you seem to have made a lot of memories the last few hours interesting? Yes. Does it point

to possibly something happening with you that can't be readily explained based on what you've told me? Yes. Ultimately, only you will be able to decide what happened. You'll have to accept it on faith or not at all."

David nodded and sat silently for a moment. "What do you think happened?" he asked, searching for some level of validation.

"From the perspective of my role as the chief medical officer on this ship, Colonel…nothing happened," Tural replied. "If I were to step back and simply evaluate what you've told me against the available evidence and combined with my faith in Allah, I believe something happened to you. Was it a dream? Something more? I don't know. If we accept that God speaks to us, who is to say that he didn't speak to you last night? Perhaps your subconscious mind gave you a much-needed emotional boost. The end result is the same. You have to decide for yourself as to your interpretation of it."

David sat back in the chair. "Thank you, Doctor," he said, beginning to rise.

"I see no reason for this to go into your medical record, Colonel."

"Thank you for that."

"Anytime, Colonel. Godspeed."

Deciding that he needed some quiet time with God, David made his way to the shul onboard the *Lion*. He donned his yarmulke and his *tallit gadol*, or prayer shawl, before entering. Rabbi Kravitz greeted him immediately. "Colonel, it's been a few days. Did you forget about Shabbat?" Kravitz asked, mirth in his voice.

David shook his head. “I’m sorry, Rabbi. The last couple of days have been…challenging for me.” As he spoke, he walked over to a pew and sat down; Kravitz followed and sat with him.

“In such times, you must turn to God,” Kravitz said.

“I realize in times such as these, Rabbi…I’m not a great Jew.”

Kravitz laughed. “And who is a great Jew? Certainly not me.”

“Rabbi, when Sheila was killed…”

“You wondered where God was?”

Looking down at his hands, David nodded. “Yes.”

“What about now?”

David looked up and directly into Kravitz’s eyes. “I think that Sheila came to me in a dream or a vision last night. And I think that God let her.”

A questioning look washed over Kravitz’s face. “That’s quite a feat, Colonel.”

“I realize it sounds crazy. I have no evidence to support that idea except Doctor Tural found I have large amounts of new memories in my hippocampus.”

“Does Dr. Tural believe you had a vision?”

“Medically speaking? No. There is no proof either way. He told me I have to accept it on faith or not at all.”

Kravitz nodded. “What happened in your dream?”

David explained from beginning to end the dream/vision he experienced, sharing almost all of the details with the exception of Sheila’s declaration of love for him and his for her. “It was more real than any dream I’ve ever had. It was like I was there.”

“God certainly has visited us in dreams since the beginning of our history,” Kravitz said. “Do you believe it was a vision from God, David?”

“Yes.”

“Then I believe it was as well. A man like you isn’t taken to flights of fancy. I think a more important question is, what are you going to do with it?”

“Fight the good fight. Without hate in my heart.”

Kravitz put his arm around David’s shoulders. “Would you allow me to pray with you, David?”

David nodded his assent and Kravitz began. “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who bestows good things upon the unworthy and has bestowed upon me every goodness.”

David immediately recognized the prayer for surviving danger. He spoke the traditional reply. “Amen. He who has bestowed upon you every goodness, may He continue to bestow upon you every goodness. Selah.”

“Lord our God, King of the Universe, bless this man,” Kravitz continued. “Grant him courage, wisdom, and give him good counsel. Show him the path, and do not allow him to venture from it. Amen.”

“Amen,” David said. “Thank you, Rabbi.”

“I will leave to your prayers and meditation,” Kravitz said, standing up.

David inclined his head in acknowledgement as the older man walked off to comfort another member of the congregation. Bowing his head, he prayed for the next fifteen minutes, closing with the prayer that was traditional to him: *God, if it is your will, spare the lives of my crew and allow them to return safely to their families*. After finishing that prayer, he stood and walked out of the shul, removing his prayer shawl and yarmulke.

Emerging from the shul and walking down the ship’s passageway back toward his office, David reflected on his feelings. From near emotional destruction twenty-four hours ago to being back to something of his former self now, he considered it nothing short of miraculous. Everything felt

right again, he realized. While part of him was still sad, he wasn't broken any longer. Smiling, he quickened his step; there was much to do and now was the time to do it.

DAVID, Tinetariro, Ruth, and a robust honor guard consisting of both Marines and enlisted crewmembers from the *Lion* stood in an airlock on the starboard side of the ship. He'd received a notification thirty minutes prior that both President Spencer and Chief Minister Sherazi would be touring the *Lion*. As Ruth was busy adjusting her dress uniform, she looked over at David. "Sir, why'd they only give us thirty minutes' notice? Trying to get everyone into the proper uniforms and at the airlock is practically impossible in that amount of time."

David smirked. "Well, I could say that they just want to see if we could do it...but I suspect the real reason is security. Having the two heads of state of the Canaan Alliance in one place is a great risk."

"We're at Canaan's main space station. This is literally the most secure location in Terran Coalition space."

"Perhaps it is, Lieutenant. But no one is putting anything to chance after the events of the last week."

Ruth peered at him for a moment. David could tell she was trying to figure out what had changed, as his entire attitude was different today. His shoulders were squared, he was smiling, and he didn't look like a storm cloud.

David felt his personal tablet vibrate and pulled it out of his uniform, staring at the screen for a moment. "Okay, look alive, ladies and gents. They'll be here momentarily."

Tinetariro performed a final inspection of the enlisted crew's uniforms. David watched her expertly fix several errors with the practice that only came from thirty years in

the service. While some might question why that was so important to her, he knew from his brief interactions with the master chief so far was that to her it was simply a matter of respect, and if the President of the Terran Coalition was going to walk onboard their vessel, she'd make sure it was perfect.

David got one more vibration on his personal communicator, an alert that the president, chief minister, and their respective entourage were entering the air lock. "Master Chief, here they come," he announced. The security detail for both heads of state strode through the open hatch, followed closely by President Spencer and Chief Minister Sherazi.

"Attention on deck!" David announced with the practiced voice of command. Immediately, the honor guard and Ruth snapped to a stiff attention posture. Tinetariro trilled her bosun's pipe, serving to "pipe" the dignitaries aboard.

"Permission to come aboard, Colonel?" President Spencer asked of David.

"Granted, sir."

"I've been looking forward to seeing this ship fully operational for some time, Colonel Cohen. That it has performed so well is beyond our wildest hopes and dreams."

David pursed his lips. "Regardless of the tragedy of the last few days, sir, we do have much to be thankful for. I consider this vessel to be a marvel, both in its technology and in the ability of its crew. No one could ask for a better team."

Spencer smiled. "Glad to hear it, Colonel. Have you met Chief Minister Sherazi?"

Sherazi took a step forward and extended his arm to David. "Greetings, Colonel."

David took the outstretched hand and shook it firmly. "Chief Minister, welcome aboard."

General MacIntosh and another Saurian male, who wore a CDF uniform, walked through the open hatch, followed by the last members of the security detail.

At the sight of MacIntosh, David stiffened once more. "General," he said formally.

"At ease, everyone," MacIntosh ordered. Looking at David, he addressed him directly. "Colonel Cohen. Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted, sir."

"Please allow me to introduce Lieutenant Colonel Talgat Aibek, the first member of the Coalition Defense Force and Royal Saurian Navy officer exchange program that our governments agreed to this morning."

He took a step forward and extended his hand to Aibek, who extended his own hand and shook David's hand firmly. David took a couple of seconds to size him up; like all Saurians, he was taller than an average human. The scales atop his head were particularly colorful. He appeared to have powerful and well-defined muscles, and there was an array of campaign ribbons on his uniform David did not recognize.

"Welcome aboard, Colonel." As he continued to process Aibek, he realized that the XO's position on the *Lion* was technically a billet for a Lieutenant Colonel. Was this his new XO? For just a moment, David felt the bile rise in him and the thought *too soon* ran through his head.

MacIntosh cleared his throat. "Let's begin the tour, Colonel Cohen."

"Yes, sir," David said crisply. He turned to Tinetariro. "Master Chief, the honor guard is dismissed."

"Yes, sir! Company, dismissed!" Tinetariro ordered. The group of crewmembers melted away, leaving David and Ruth to conduct the tour. Over the next couple of hours, he led them through the *Lion*. Starting with the massive engineering space, he found himself impressed by the

questions President Spencer asked about the anti-matter reactor. They also toured the hangar bay and the bridge.

Ending up in the wardroom, David, MacIntosh, Aibek, and the two heads of space sat down while the security details took up positions outside, save for a single agent from both governments.

After pleasantries and chitchat had been dispensed with, MacIntosh got down to business. "As I'm sure everyone here is acutely aware, our new alliance brings with it many logistical concerns. Not the least of which is how do we tightly integrate two separate militaries."

"Not unlike the issues the Terran Coalition had fully integrating most nation-state militaries into the Coalition Defense Force at the outbreak of hostilities with the League," David said.

"Exactly, Colonel. Only this is harder because we're two separate species who do things very differently."

President Spencer gestured between David and Aibek. "The reason you two are here, Colonel Cohen and Colonel Aibek… is we want you to set the standard for integration between the Terran Coalition and Saurian Empire. To help set that standard, Colonel Aibek is being assigned as the XO for the *Lion of Judah*."

David nodded his understanding. "Yes, sir." *Well, I was right about that part at least. Hopefully, this guy is a good officer who will integrate well into the crew and work seamlessly with me.*

MacIntosh stared at David and Aibek with a gaze that seemed to bore into David's mind. "I want to be perfectly clear here. This has to work. For the sake of both our nations. We're going to have one chance and one chance only to push the League back before they send their own reinforcements. The only thing in our favor right now is our supply lines are

far shorter than theirs. As the first Saurian serving on a CDF capital ship, Colonel Aibek, it's your duty to show the way."

Aibek replied with a crisp, "Yes, sir."

Sherazi leaned forward in his chair. "If the two of you can work effectively together, it will show the rest of us the way. We're all counting on you."

David and Aibek exchanged glances before David spoke. "Sirs, I think I speak for myself and for Colonel Aibek when I say that we're going to make this work. The League is an evil that needs to be pushed back and defeated. With our combined strength, that goal is within reach. It will not be derailed because of personality conflicts." He paused for a moment, thinking he might have been too forward. "I hope that wasn't too direct, Colonel."

"Not at all, Colonel. I am certain I can adjust to your command style, whatever it may be. And if we have any issues… I would welcome a sparring match to clear the air in any human martial art form you would care to choose."

David glanced at Aibek for a moment, not even sure what to make of his statement. Aibek, on seeing his reaction, tried to clear up the confusion. "I jest, Colonel."

David cracked a smile. "Noted."

MacIntosh looked somewhat amused himself. "That settles it, then. We're going to make this work. Then we're going to kick the League's ass back to Earth and take out those communist bastards once and for all."

"Now that's a sentiment I can get behind despite the language, Andrew," President Spencer said, smiling himself. "Andrew, Chief Minister, any final thoughts?"

Sherazi shook his head. "None. I have confidence the right officers are assigned to this ship."

President Spencer stood, quickly followed by everyone else; the meeting was close to being adjourned. "Colonel, I wish you good luck and Godspeed. Carry on."

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” David quickly responded. “Perhaps Colonel Aibek could stay behind? I’d be happy to show him around some of the other areas of the ship, like the mess.”

“Excellent idea, Colonel. I’ll show our guests back to the shuttle. Godspeed to you both,” MacIntosh replied.

After the two heads of state and General MacIntosh had left, David turned to Aibek. “I realize we don’t know each other well. To summarize how I do things…I am tough, but fair. I want the best of this crew and this ship, and most of all, I want to defeat the League so that someday, perhaps we don’t have to get up every morning and kill our fellow man.”

Aibek seemed lost in thought for a moment before responding to David. “That is a burden I do not relish, Colonel Cohen. I hope my presence here can be positive. I will strive to the best of my ability to serve well as your executive officer.”

David resolved to take Aibek at his word; after all, MacIntosh wouldn’t have assigned him if there were any doubt in his mind about the Saurian’s abilities or effectiveness. “I have no doubt of that, Colonel. Now, if you’d follow me, let me show you some things about this ship that aren’t on the main tour.”

Aibek smiled and walked around the table. “Lead on, sir.”

Sometime later, onboard the shuttle that carried President Spencer and General MacIntosh back to Canaan, President Spencer called MacIntosh into his private office. The shuttle was designated “Coalition Defense Force One,” while Spencer was onboard. It was outfitted with the latest defensive technologies that centered around stealth. The

craft also carried enough communications and command and control gear to run the war if required.

MacIntosh strode through the door into the Presidential office and brought himself to attention before the desk President Spencer sat behind. “General MacIntosh, reporting as ordered, sir.”

“Andrew, when are you going to relax with that?” Spencer asked with a smile on his face.

“Mr. President, it’s a matter of habit. Respect for the office. Even if we are old friends.”

“I understand,” Spencer said as he stood up from behind the desk and walked around, gesturing at the two chairs in front of the desk. “Please, have a seat.”

MacIntosh sat in the chair furthest from Spencer; Spencer then sat in the vacant seat. “What’s on your mind, sir?” he asked.

“I wanted to ask you about our young Colonel Cohen. I’ve heard some disturbing reports regarding his mental stability.”

MacIntosh looked away. “I can’t begin to know how he, or many other soldiers, continue to function in this war, sir. He seemed fine to me today.”

“I’ll agree that today he seemed fine, but he was clearly not fine earlier this week.”

“You realize that probably every member of the space corps that’s seen battle has some form of PTSD, sir?”

“Andrew, this is the biggest, best ship in our fleet. We can’t afford any screw-ups. Is he battle-ready?”

MacIntosh made eye contact with Spencer; the discussion forced him to confront a reality he didn’t want to face. David Cohen was the best man for the job, he was sure of it. His emotional state was another question, on the other hand. “I’m not sure, sir.”

“I want you to figure that out. Talk to him. If he is, then fine. God knows that young man has earned his stripes, and by any measure, he’s a hero. I can think of no one else I’d rather have leading us into battle with this wondrous new ship. But if he’s not emotionally stable, then we’re going to have to quietly make sure he gets the help he needs and put another CO in place. Quickly.”

“I understand, sir,” MacIntosh said, sorrow in his voice.

“Andrew, please know that’s the last thing I want.”

MacIntosh nodded in response. “Yes, sir. It’s the last thing I want either, because I don’t think we can win without Colonel Cohen commanding the *Lion of Judah*. What that ship did to Seville and the *Destruction* will inspire fear in the League, and that fear will be worth more than fifty starships as reinforcements.”

“You put a lot of stock in morale.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve seen men and women accomplish things that no flesh and blood human had any right to, simply because they had belief in their cause, and they believed they could do what needed to be done. That kind of Esprit de Corps comes from good leadership, strong morale, and an unshakeable sense of duty.”

“Then for all our sakes, I hope that Colonel Cohen is ready for the task in front of him.” Spencer sighed. “Would you care to pray with me about this?”

MacIntosh nodded and bowed his head. Sometimes, he wasn’t sure God was even listening anymore. With all the strife, bloodshed, and horror in the universe that they contended with on a daily basis, it was easy to believe that God no longer controlled what happened or the events around them. He hoped that was wrong as he closed his eyes and waited for Spencer to pray.

43

David was ordered to report to General MacIntosh's office at 0800 for what was referred to as a meeting by his adjutant. The suddenness of the order, and what David knew had been erratic, emotional behavior on his part the last few days, had him questioning what the subject matter would be. Truly, since the dream he had that felt more like a vision, he had begun to resolve his emotions and get his head back in the fight. David knew that the road ahead would be long and difficult, but he found himself looking forward to it.

After greeting Major Roberts, David was shown back to the now-familiar office of General MacIntosh. "Colonel David Cohen, reporting as ordered, sir," he said, bracing to attention.

MacIntosh looked up from his tablet. "Take a seat, Colonel."

As David sat down, MacIntosh put his tablet aside and stared directly into his eyes. "I'll cut to the chase, Colonel. I need to know your head is in the game."

David returned the stare, keeping eye contact. "It is, sir. I'm ready to go."

MacIntosh leaned back in his chair. "Really? Is that before or after you nearly assaulted an enlisted man for following

procedures regarding repatriation of our war dead?"

David winced. *I guess somebody reported that.* "Sir, I wanted the contractors that perished to be treated with honor and respect. They earned it. If not for them, I wouldn't be here, nor would my ship."

"I see. You were also observed crying uncontrollably at Major Thompson's funeral."

David continued to stare straight ahead. "With respect, sir, I lost my best friend. I believe that an emotional reaction was warranted."

MacIntosh frowned. "I didn't say it wasn't, Colonel. But considering these and other reports… I have reservations as to if you are in the right state of mind to get back into the war."

"I've been able to put most of it behind me the last few days, sir."

"Have you seen a counselor?" MacIntosh probed.

"No, sir."

"Then how have you been able to put it behind you in a couple of days?"

"Sir, that is a personal matter," David said, not wishing to discuss his dream.

"Not good enough, Colonel. If you want back into space without a full mental health workup, I want details."

David swallowed hard and sighed. "Very well, sir." He paused for a moment. *How do I explain this without sounding insane?* "Several nights ago, I had a dream that was vividly real. It felt like something that actually happened as opposed to simply being a dream."

As David spoke, MacIntosh stared at him with an inscrutable look on his face. "In it, I had a long conversation with Sheila. She told me why she did what she did, and she assured me that there was a better place after all of this." He

decided to leave out the part about her leaving the video for him or their discussions regarding their love for each other.

"When I woke up the next morning, it was as if something dark was lifted off me. I visited Dr. Tural to discuss the matter with him."

MacIntosh's right eyebrow shot up. "And?"

"He told me that he found evidence in a scan of my brain that showed increased mental activity consistent with a fresh memory, but there was no scientific evidence that was conclusive either way."

"An interesting story, Colonel. What do you think happened?"

"I think that somehow, some way, Sheila reached out to me from what we think of as heaven. I realize that sounds a bit insane, sir. But I think she wanted me to get my head screwed back on straight. I also…" David trailed off for a moment. "I also think that maybe God let her to do it to get my head screwed back on straight." He looked at MacIntosh, waiting for a response and unsure of his fate.

"I see, Colonel," MacIntosh replied and stood up, walking around his desk to sit in the chair next to David. "I don't mention my faith too much. I'm a practicing Catholic." He cracked a smile. "Which, for someone of Scottish descent, is a bit different. Causes debates at family reunions."

MacIntosh continued with his train of thought. "When I was still a young man, I served as an engineering officer on a light cruiser called the *Pericles*. I'll never forget something that happened on that ship. During a battle, one of our primary coolant lines ruptured and a damage control team tried to seal it. Radiation levels got high enough that the computer system automatically sealed the compartment. We desperately tried to get the door open to get those men out before they died, but every tool we had broke down and we couldn't get in."

MacIntosh paused for a moment as he relived the memory. “The chaplain on the *Pericles* was an old Catholic priest…Father Rafferty. He happened to be assigned to a damage control team in the engineering spaces and he came up to us while we were swearing, banging on the door, trying to cut it with a plasma cutter, and anything else we could think of. He asked us to let him pray with us.”

David listened intently as MacIntosh continued.

“We all held hands with him, and I will never forget the feeling that washed over me as this priest asked God to help us. I heard him say that we would become calm, that our tools would begin to function, and that we would rescue those men. A feeling of peace came over me that I have never felt before or since. After he was done, we tried again. We had those men out in less than five minutes, and every last one of them survived.”

David noticed MacIntosh had become emotional as he spoke of this past memory. “I am sure that some people would tell me that it was just random chance and we got lucky. But I know with every fiber of my being that somehow, through Father Rafferty, God helped us save those men. If you believe that God helped you by letting your best friend explain something to you from beyond the grave… then I’ll back that one hundred and fifty percent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

MacIntosh put his hand on David’s shoulder. “You are a fine officer, Colonel Cohen. You have a lot left to give to this fight and I need you in it. All of you.”

“I’m in it, sir. To the end, regardless of where that takes us,” David said, his voice filled with confidence.

“Then get your ship ready to get back out there. We need to fly the flag for a few more days, but after that…you will be back on the front.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed, Colonel.”

David came to attention before leaving the room, looking at MacIntosh in an entirely different light.

David had a meeting with Dr. Hayworth in his office set for 1400 hours’ shipboard time. Looking at the clock on his tablet, he wondered if Hayworth was just one of those people that were always late or if he was doing it on purpose to spite him.

Around fifteen minutes after the hour, the door chime buzzed. “Come,” David said, annoyance in his voice.

The hatch swung open and Dr. Hayworth strode in, plopping into one of the chairs in front of David’s desk. “Greetings, Colonel. How are you today?” he asked cheerfully.

“I’m well, Doctor, thank you for asking.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard by now that Major Merriweather and I have been assigned to the *Lion of Judah* for the foreseeable future.”

“I have,” David said, failing to hide the annoyance in his voice. He figured that Hayworth would have been disappointed by this, but for whatever reason, the doctor seemed to relish it.

“Oh, come now, Colonel. This will be fun.”

“I don’t follow, Doctor. I don’t like being responsible for civilians that haven’t served and don’t know how to handle themselves on a military vessel. I remind you…we’re at war.”

Hayworth just smiled. “I’m what you would call a force multiplier, Colonel. I’ll ensure you get the best technology and the newest equipment.”

David suppressed the desire to roll his eyes at Hayworth. The man just got under his skin; there was no doubt about it.

“Well, anything to make this ship more effective than it already is, Doctor.”

“Was that a compliment, Colonel?”

“I’ve never doubted your technical abilities, Doctor.” David forced a thin smile.

“Oh, I figured you would tell me that God provided the technology from on high.”

David took a breath. “I think that God gives us the mental abilities that we use to make the technology, Doctor.”

Hayworth leaned forward. “Let me let you in on a secret, Colonel. There is no God. I’m just a freak of nature with a high intelligence quotient, and you have me to thank for saving your ass out there.”

David stared at Hayworth, unwilling to back down. “Only a fool says there is no God, Doctor.”

“Ah yes, isn’t that line from the Psalms?” Hayworth inquired.

“Yes, it is. Have you read the Torah?”

Hayworth’s expression took on a hard stare. “I was raised an atheist by my parents, but my wife was a Christian. I’ve never had faith in anything but science, but once she asked me to read the Bible, and I agreed. Oh, she believed that God not only existed, but actually cared about her. Little good it did her when she got sick and medical science couldn’t save her. Where was that magical God then? He doesn’t exist. Do yourself a favor and accept that, Colonel. You’re a smart man. I’ve seen that. You shouldn’t concern yourself with fairy tales to keep the children behaving.”

David sucked in a breath. Perhaps the events in life the doctor had gone through had colored his views; that was somewhat easier for David to accept rather than the nonstop insults to those who believed coming from Hayworth. “Doctor, you will never shake my belief in God,” he said forcefully.

“Really…then why did your God let Major Thompson die?”

David felt Hayworth’s argument sting deep in his heart. “God didn’t let her die, Doctor. She made a choice to do what she believed in. She put another’s life ahead of her own. That’s what she believed she had to do.”

Hayworth smirked. “Ah, religious people try to have it two ways. Which is it? Do we have free will or does God have a plan and pull our strings?”

“Is it so hard to believe that HaShem has a desire for us to do certain things but chooses not to force us? From my perspective, why would a supernatural being with the power to do anything he desires force us to do his will? He wants us to choose to do right, Doctor.” David paused for a moment. “I must ask. If you dislike those of us who have faith as much as you would like to make me think…why are you here?”

Hayworth looked past him. “Tell me, Colonel, if you could, would you force me to believe what you do?”

A look of revulsion crossed David’s face. “Is that a serious question, Doctor? I would never force another to believe what I do. In fact, I would, and do, put my life on the line on a daily basis for your right to believe in anything you want, including nothing.”

Hayworth pursed his lips together in acceptance to David’s response. “And that is why I am here, Colonel. I may not agree with the stated beliefs of ninety-eight percent of the Terran Coalition’s citizens, but at least I’ve got the right to believe what I want and do what I want.”

David leaned back in his chair as Hayworth continued. “I’d like to ask you, though; do you ever question your beliefs? Do you ever consider that you may be wrong?” he asked.

“I have many times. I’ve questioned God’s existence, and why bad things happen to seemingly good people.”

“And?”

“I cannot find a more logical explanation for our existence than a creator. Are you familiar with ‘Pascal’s Wager’?” David asked, referencing the work of Blaise Pascal, who created an argument that humans bet with their lives that God either exists or does not exist.

Hayworth raised a hand. “Colonel, just as I cannot shake your belief, you cannot shake mine.”

“Fair enough, Doctor. A counter question… do you ever question your beliefs?”

Hayworth regarded David for a moment. “Every day, Colonel. Every day.” He stood to leave. “For all our sakes, Colonel, if your supernatural being does exist, I hope it’s behind you. I’ll do what I can to give you the best tools possible in the meanwhile. I trust you will use them to the best of your ability.”

“Of course, Doctor,” David grated out.

“Good day, Colonel.” Hayworth turned on his heel and walked out. Ruminating on what Hayworth had said, David thought back to how Sheila would have told him not to judge the man, but to offer him the benefit of the doubt. After understanding at least some of what drove the doctor’s beliefs, he now had some level of understanding of him and resolved to try not to let his annoyance show through. Thinking about how much he missed Sheila, he put himself back into reviewing reports.

44

DAVID GLANCED around the set of the holonews program, a different channel from his last adventure in the media. Canaan News Network had an editorial viewpoint markedly different from his last interviewer's take on the war, for which he was grateful. Even so, he wanted to be careful not to "spike the football," so to speak. His emotions were still conflicted, but for the most part, he was back on a fairly even keel. More than anything, he wanted to get the public relations work out of the way and get back to what he knew had to be done; taking the war to the League.

Seated in the interview chair, David waited patiently for the interviewer, a holonet pundit by the name of Karen Byrne. As he waited, he ran over the talking points that General MacIntosh had drilled into him about the war, focusing on the entry of the Saurians and the rekindling of the Canaan Alliance.

After a few minutes, Byrne walked in, flashing an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Colonel. I had a last-minute change in the next guest that I had to prepare for."

David stood and offered his hand. "No problem at all, ma'am."

Without a moment's hesitation, she took the offered hand and shook it with a grip that surprised David. "All ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before we start, I'd like to say that, off the record, what you and your crew have done last week has given me and a lot of other people in the Terran Coalition hope that we can finally win this war."

"That means a lot, Ms. Byrne. But the credit belongs to my crew, not me."

"Please, call me Karen." She smiled. "My interview notes said you were humble. That's a nice trait, Colonel, but let me give you some advice…you're a hero. Own it. If for no other reason than it helps our cause to have a hero, especially right now."

"I'm not a hero," David said, sadness lacing his voice. "The real heroes were the men and women that returned home in flag-draped caskets."

She leaned forward and touched his arm. "Yes, they are, Colonel. You must remember the citizens of our country need a real live, larger-than-life hero. Not only do you fit the bill, but you just might be the real thing. I've heard you say that you serve because of a desire to be part of something bigger than yourself. So, if for no other reason than to honor the rest of your crew, own this moment. All of us need it. We need to believe again. Almost all of us, I'm sure even you, had begun to accept that someday the League would win."

"I think I did, Karen," David said. "But that didn't mean we weren't going to make them pay for every inch in blood." He offered her a rueful smile.

"Ready to get started, Colonel?"

"Let's do this," he said, immensely more relaxed than the last time he had been in a similar chair.

Byrne motioned to the director of the studio. "Take us live," she said with her trademark warm smile.

David sat back in his chair as the director counted down the time to live. At three seconds, he switched to hand signals and went silent.

"This is Karen Byrne, reporting for Canaan News Network. I am joined tonight by a special guest, Colonel David Cohen, Commanding Officer of the CSV *Lion of Judah*. Thank you for joining us, Colonel."

"Thank you for having me, Ms. Byrne."

"It has been a momentous week for the Coalition, Colonel," she said. "How does it feel to be the son of the man that saved Canaan, and now, who also saved Canaan himself?"

David pursed his lips. "Just doing my job to the best of my ability."

"Thankfully for the Coalition, that was enough to defeat Admiral Seville and his armada. You lost a close friend, didn't you?"

David swallowed hard. "I did."

"Can you tell our viewers about her?"

"Major Thompson was the best friend a person could ever ask for. She lived for the cause, and she would lay down her life for another without a moment's hesitation. She'd give the shirt off her back to someone who didn't have one or her last credit to a food drive. She lived what she believed," David explained with pride.

"I know we've all lost someone in this war. I've literally never met someone in the Terran Coalition who was untouched by it. That said; I understand this loss was deeply personal to you."

"Yes, it was. Sheila and I met each other a few days into boot camp twenty years ago. You make bonds during that period that last for life. I can still hear my drill instructor yelling at me," David said with a trace of a smile. "But I have

an obligation, as do all of us who have lost someone, to carry on. Otherwise, their deaths are in vain."

"And now the Saurians have joined our side…how do you think that's going to help the Coalition?" Byrne asked, sticking to a line of questioning agreed upon ahead of time with the military.

"I think it's going to change the course of the war. The Saurians have a fleet that is roughly the same size as our own. They've pledged to send seventy percent of it to join us in the fight against the League. I believe we will push the League out of our space and throw them on their heels," David said with conviction. It wasn't just one of his provided talking points by MacIntosh; he believed it.

"Do you believe we can ultimately win the war?"

"Yes, not only can we win the war, we *will* win the war. The Terran Coalition and our allies must win. If we don't, it will plunge our galaxy into a dark age."

Sitting back in her chair for a moment, Byrne paused before asking, "And how do we win, Colonel?"

David hesitated for a moment, remembering the order he received from MacIntosh not to over editorialize. "I think we've all heard the saying that might makes right; in our case, I believe that right makes might. In terms of combat, we now have the initiative. We, being the entire Coalition Defense Force and the Saurian Imperial Navy, will take the fight to the League and drive them back. The thing is, we have to keep the initiative and press forward. We cannot lose sight of the end goal, the destruction of the League of Sol."

"Why not simply force a peace with them?"

"If that is what our civilian leaders desire, then that's what we will do, ma'am. But President Spencer has been clear that he believes the League is an evil that must be destroyed, and I couldn't agree with him more. As for my part, I recall the words of a soldier many hundreds of years

ago that pledged he would fight, he would sacrifice, and he would act as if the outcome of the entire war rested solely on him. I ask that of myself and of those who I command."

Byrne regarded David for a moment. "Thank you, Colonel. I believe you've painted a picture for our viewers of where things are now. Can you say what the next destination for the *Lion of Judah* is?"

David smiled. "Shakedown cruise for us for the next three months, then on to the front."

"I'm sure you will be anxious to get back into the fight, Colonel. Good hunting and Godspeed."

David nodded his head as the on-the-air light blinked off. He relaxed in his chair. *That wasn't too bad, especially considering the last time I was in the interview chair.*

"Thank you for joining me, Colonel. It was an honor to meet you and regardless of what you say, I, and most of the Terran Coalition, view you as a hero. Thank you for your service."

David stood as she did and offered his hand. "Just doing my job but thank you."

Byrne smiled and shook his hand. "Then keep on doing it, Colonel. Hopefully, I'll get to interview you after we drive the League from our space. I look forward to the day."

"Me too. Until then, Godspeed, Karen."

"Godspeed, Colonel."

Turning away from her, David walked out of the studio and made his way outside, heading back to the ship. While he didn't care for the clear propaganda use of his ship, his crew, and himself, he understood why it had to be done. Morale had been weak for years, and the people needed a symbol to help them believe again. If that were his crew, his ship, and himself, well, all of them would have to live up to that standard.

Walking down the street of the busy capital city on Canaan, David could tell even now that something had changed. The way people talked to each other, looked at one another, and even walked down the sidewalks had changed. There was purpose in their steps, smiles back on their faces, and they seemed to have hope again. And if there was hope, anything was possible.

45

After the ship had been fully provisioned and made ready to launch a few days after his final interview, David held his final command briefing before the ship was due to depart. Arriving nearly twenty minutes before the meeting was to commence, he sat in the chair at the end of the table. Thinking over the events of the last two weeks, he was in some ways in awe of what had transpired, and in other ways simply dumbfounded any of them had survived.

The ship's senior officers began to arrive, and after standing, he greeted each one and offered his hand. As the last member of the invited party entered the room, David took his place at the head of the table.

"Thank you all for coming. I wanted to gather one last time today to talk over our orders, ensure all departments have what they need for the coming few weeks, and that we're ready to go," David stated as he took control of the room.

Ruth, Hanson, Demood, and Tinetariro nodded; the others looked at David intently.

"I would also like to welcome two new members of our crew: Lieutenant Colonel Talgat Aibek of the Saurian Imperial Navy, and Kenneth Lowe from SSI, who is leading

the four hundred contractors that will be joining us for the foreseeable future to keep our ship fully operational."

Kenneth pursed his lips, and Aibek interjected, "Thank you, Colonel Cohen. It is an honor to be a part of this crew. I know that you all suffered a great loss from the death of Major Thompson. I will endeavor in some small way to live up to her standard."

David paused for a moment to compose himself. While he was in a much better place, the wound from his loss was still raw. "Thank you, Colonel."

Turning his gaze to Hanson and Merriweather, David asked, "Major Hanson, what is our engineering readiness?"

Hanson looked at Merriweather for a moment before clearing his throat. "The reactor is as ready as we can make it, sir. Major Merriweather and Doctor Hayworth believe that the reactor is fully combat capable."

"I have concerns, Major, that the lack of a shakedown cruise will cause small glitches to manifest at the most inopportune times."

"That's not an unreasonable concern, sir," Merriweather replied. "We've taken steps to reduce the risk by stockpiling spare parts for every conceivable critical system."

Kenneth spoke up. "If I may, sirs, ma'am?"

At David's signal, Kenneth spoke. "We've filled four of the six major cargo bays with spare parts, focusing on weapons, defensive systems including damage control, as well as propulsion. I'm confident there's enough to sustain us through a three-month deployment."

David relaxed slightly. *We're not out of the woods, but Kenneth's got a good plan*. "Very well. Colonel Amir, what is our flight wing status?"

Amir cleared his throat. "Sir, we have all sixteen squadrons onboard along with munitions and parts for a sustained campaign." He paused for a moment. "There is

one concern, however. Our squadrons are pulled from several different carriers, and two are filled with raw recruits. There will be some amount of time required to form them into a cohesive fighting unit."

Aibek raised an eyebrow. "We only have two weeks before we begin our counter-offensive."

With that comment, the rest of the eyes in the room locked on to him, including David.

"That information is eyes only, Colonel," David said. *I wasn't going to discuss that with Kenneth in the room; he's got no need to know.* "It does not leave this room under any circumstances. Command has been careful to allow leaks that would suggest we've got at least three months before we start pushing back." David made a special point to look at Kenneth. "Mr. Lowe, please remember the terms of your non-disclosure agreement."

Kenneth looked back at David uneasily. "I didn't hear anything, sir."

David smiled. "Very good." After a moment, he continued, "Weapons status, Lieutenant Goldberg?"

Ruth held her head up and sat straighter in her chair. "All damage to our magnetic cannons has been repaired, and all weapon systems are fully operational. We also have made some changes to our shield distribution network, thanks to suggestions made by the contractor team. They analyzed the logs of shield generator failures and devised a way to cross connect quadrants. I believe we'll see better performance in our next engagement."

"We also made some adjustments to our sub-light engines and thruster systems, sir. Combined with the shield enhancements, it will make the ship a tougher nut to crack," Hammond said.

"Outstanding work, Lieutenant Goldberg, Lieutenant Hammond."

David turned his head toward Dr. Tural. “Doctor, have you been able to get the rest of the medical personnel you asked for transferred in?”

“Yes, sir. We now have our full medical personnel complement, including a dentist and a counselor.”

David glanced at Tinetariro for his next question. “Master Chief, how are we doing on crew morale and readiness?”

Tinetariro smiled thinly. “The enlisted personnel are shipshape and ready to go, sir. We have a full crew, full stores, and we’re ready to fight.”

“And morale?” David pressed.

“Quite frankly, sir, I’ve never seen morale higher. The ratings want to, pardon the term, kick some ass.”

There were assorted smiles and grins from the assembled group, but it was Calvin who spoke. “It’s almost like we got a ship crewed by Marines.”

There was laughter and chuckles from all present. “Thank you, Master Chief,” David said. Turning to Calvin, he posed his next question. “Colonel Demood, what of our Marine contingent?”

Calvin broke into a grin. “All three thousand Marines onboard and awaiting to be ferried to our next engagement zone.”

“Oh, so we’re just the ferry service now?” Ruth said, her arms crossed in front of her but wearing a playful smile.

“Lieutenant, we all know if you need something absolutely, positively blown apart, call the Marines,” Calvin answered, just a bit cocky in true Marine fashion.

“Or I could just fire enough fusion warheads into the target to reduce it to its constituent atoms,” Ruth said with her own evil grin.

“What about the special operations team?” David interrupted with a smile.

“Accounted for and ready to roll, sir. We technically have two spec ops troops onboard, as well as a company of special operations capable Recon Marines.”

“So we’re ready to roll?” David asked the room.

Heads nodded in agreement.

“Alright. We have two weeks of intensive, twenty-four-hour-a-day shakedown activities. After that, we will deploy with a battlegroup that includes the Royal Saurian Navy’s flagship, the RSN *Elcin*,” David announced. The *Elcin* was a large battleship that was purpose built with sixteen turrets of magnetic-cannons, and it was the pride of the Royal Saurian Navy.

“Our objective is to drive the League from our space and start pushing them back into their own sphere of influence.” Tapping a few buttons, David called up a map on the interactive hologram projector in the middle of the conference table. “As you can see, the League is currently engaged in combat operations in eleven Terran Coalition planetary systems and has occupied fully half of our outer rim colonies in the last ten years. With the reformation of the Canaan Alliance, with the Terran Coalition and the Saurian Empire as signatories, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have activated the old CA military structure. As such, the Supreme Allied Commander, Space Force will lead the joint Terran Coalition and Royal Saurian Navy fleets committed to the war effort.” David paused for a moment and pulled up another graphic, this one showing the chain of command from the SACSF flowing down from Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force. “Additionally, the Joint Chiefs and Royal Saurian Navy command have created the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force. It’s pronounced shafe,” David said, using the phonetic pronunciation. “SHAEF will oversee the invasion of League space.” After a moment to let his words sink in, he asked, “Any questions?”

“How are we going to keep all that brass shiny and working well together, sir?” Calvin said lightly.

Feigning mock annoyance, Aibek shook his head. “By bashing heads together so everyone gets along.”

The humans stared at the Saurian for a few moments before he smiled. “I jest!”

Calvin commented dryly, “That’s some dry humor, Colonel.”

“The best kind!” Aibek quipped back.

“Okay, everyone, I hate overly long meetings, so that’s all I have. Any saved rounds?” David asked.

Ruth leaned forward. “Master Chief, any idea when we could get invited to the chief’s mess?”

Tinetariro turned and gave Ruth a glowering look. “With respect, ma’am, you have to wait for the invitation. You can’t ask for it.”

Kenneth took that moment to ask a question. “Ah, sirs, if I may, I was asked by members of my team if I could request that the former chiefs and above of the contracting team be allowed to eat at the chief’s mess?”

“The master chief has final say on that, Kenneth,” David said.

Tinetariro gave the contractor an appraising look. “I’ll allow anyone who retired as a chief petty officer or above to join us anytime, Mr. Lowe.”

“Thank you, ma’am. If I may… why is going to the chief’s mess so important to everyone?”

“Because the chiefs have the best food. They run the mess and cooking staff, and ensure they get the best food for themselves,” David said. “It’s called the goat locker.”

Ruth smirked. “You would know, sir, mustang and all.”

Tinetariro rolled her eyes at the conversation. “Tell you what, Mr. Lowe, join us tomorrow for dinner and see what it’s all about.”

“Wait a minute, you just invited a defense contractor to the chief’s mess, but not us?” Calvin exclaimed with mock annoyance.

Tinetariro gave him a faux smile. “Why, yes, sir.”

The entire group laughed aloud at the turn of events as David stood once more. “Okay, everyone. Let’s get to it. We shove off at 0800 tomorrow morning. I’ll see most of you on the bridge. You are dismissed. Godspeed.”

There was a chorus of “Yes, sirs” from the team as they stood and filed out of the room. Kenneth stayed behind, apparently waiting for a moment alone with David. He took notice and paused for the contractor. “Something on your mind, Kenneth?”

“I’ve been meaning to thank you, sir.”

David raised an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

The lanky defense contractor broke into a grin. “For whatever you said to my boss’ boss, sir. You saved my hide, but more importantly to me, you saved my team’s hide.”

“I might have had a short conversation. After all, you guys saved our hide out there.”

Kenneth tilted his head to one side. “All part of the service, sir.”

David laughed. “Keep it up, Mr. Lowe.”

Pulling himself up just a little bit taller, Kenneth pursued his lips together and smiled. “Yes, sir.”

“Carry on,” David said, walking past the contractor toward the exit. Striding down the passageway of the ship to his office, he felt alive again. They were able to strike back at the League of Sol, and his ship would be in the vanguard. A month ago, he would have said that actually pushing back and taking the fight to the League was impossible. Today, it wasn’t only possible; it seemed probable they would win. Smiling to himself, he knew the fight was far from over, but

perhaps this was the beginning of the end for the League and for the war.

46

The next morning, David rose at his normal hour of "O Dark Thirty," and completed his morning exercise and grooming routine. Since they were not yet underway, David chose to wear his service khaki uniform instead of the traditional space sweater. On his way toward the wardroom, he bumped into Tinetariro outside of a gravlift station. As soon as she saw him, she brought herself to attention. "Colonel Cohen," she said as a greeting.

"At ease, Master Chief."

"How are you this morning, sir?"

"Honestly, I can't tell you the last time I felt this energized. Even with all the emotional trauma of the last few weeks, the concept that we might be on the verge of pasting the League all over space…that's enough to get me up and going in the morning."

Tinetariro broke into a large grin. "I couldn't say it any better, sir. Have you had breakfast already?"

"I have not, Master Chief."

"Perhaps you would care to join me in the chief's mess, sir?"

David smiled. "I would be honored." Technically, David could go into any mess or any part of the ship he wanted, as

he was its commanding officer. However, tradition was that only chiefs, or those they invited, could enter the chief's mess.

"Then follow me, sir. We have something prepared for you."

David fell in behind her, wondering what on earth they had come up with. After a brisk walk through the ship, they arrived at the chief's mess. Even though the ship had technically only been a commissioned warship again for the better part of two weeks, the chiefs had already made the space their own. There was a stylized drawing of a goat in a spacesuit adorning the hatch, which David chuckled at. "The Goat Locker, eh?"

Tinetariro laughed as she opened the door. "I thought that was a nice touch myself."

Striding into the large mess area, David's eyes were immediately drawn to a buffet of food around the central section of the room. "All the food today is kosher, sir," Tinetariro continued.

David walked over to the buffet and immediately realized the buffet was an Israeli breakfast. He got a plate and put a generous helping of eggs and root vegetables on it, along with some smoked fish.

"I tried some of that fish."

"Oh?" David said.

"It was… interesting."

David grinned. "Well, it's pareve. Even a kosher sausage can't be consumed with the rest of this food."

"I'm just a gentile, sir. It's Greek to me."

"Pareve means a food is neither meat nor dairy. We can't mix the two types of food."

"Who decides all that anyway?"

"Various rabbis throughout the ages, interpreting the Torah."

“I don’t think I could give up my bacon, sir.”

“Never had it, so I don’t know what I’m missing,” David said, laughing.

After both of them had finished heaping their plates, they walked to a nearby table and sat down. David took out his napkin, leaving his silverware on the table. “Would you care to join me in blessing our food, Master Chief?” he asked.

“Gladly, sir.”

David bowed his head. “God, creator of the universe and all that is within it, bless this food to us today, and give us wisdom to do Your will.”

Lifting his head, he dug into the eggs. They were very fresh and tasted amazing. “Where did you guys get all this fresh food, Master Chief?”

Tinetariro grinned. “Well, we do control the food budget after all,” she replied with a twinkle in her eyes. “That and the quartermaster corps were unusually willing to send some really good stuff our way. We’ll eat well for at least the next month.”

“Count me in. I’ve spent so much time in space, I’ve forgotten what basic staples taste like.”

“We will be having this breakfast buffet every third day we’re underway until the supplies run out. You’re welcome to join us on any of those days.”

David again broke into a smile. “Well, thank you, Master Chief. I’m pretty sure I’m going to take you up on that offer for as long as I can.”

“On a more serious note, Colonel, I don’t expect the next six months to be easy. But I want you to know that everyone on this ship will give whatever it takes to secure victory, including the ultimate sacrifice.”

David set his fork down, looking at her intently. “I’d much rather our friends in the League pay the ultimate price rather than us, Master Chief.”

“Agreed, Colonel.”

After both of them finished their meals, David stood. “Join me on the bridge, Master Chief? We’re to depart Canaan spacedock in half an hour.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything in the galaxy, Colonel.”

David smiled, realizing as he did that for perhaps the first time in many years, he was actually happy. Even in the midst of all the terror, sadness, and the unending war, he was for the first time in many, many years, perhaps ever, a happy warrior. Not happy that he had to fight, or that they’d have to kill a lot of Leaguers in the coming months, but happy in the sense that his cause was just, and he was glad to fight for it. “I’ll see you up there, Master Chief. Thanks again for the great meal.”

“Anytime, Colonel.”

David walked out of the chief’s mess and made his way to the bridge of the *Lion*. He exchanged salutes with the armed Marines that guarded the door to the combined bridge and combat information center. Ducking under the hatch, he pulled on his cover and saw Tinetariro. *How’d she get up here faster than me?* Perhaps it was some super-secret master chief ability.

“Colonel on the bridge!” Tinetariro said formally.

“As you were,” David said as the enlisted personnel and officers that weren’t buckled in to their stations braced to attention and saluted. He returned their salutes with a crisp one of his own.

Aibek sat in the XO’s chair and David slid in next to him. This was something he’d have to get used to: no Sheila on the bridge.

Turning to Aibek, David asked, “Are we ready to depart, XO?”

“Yes, sir. All stations report ready, and we are cleared to depart from Canaan space control.”

“Communications, please tie 1MC into my console.”

“1MC tied in, sir. You’re online,” Taylor said from his station.

“Attention, all hands, this is the commanding officer. Just a week ago, we were heading out to secure peace for the Terran Coalition. I know that, like me, all of you were bitterly disappointed when that peace agreement turned out to be yet another ruse by the League. However, thanks to the dedication, bravery, and tenacity of this crew and the grace of God, we defeated the League. Today, we stand united as ever, and with our new allies.” David glanced at Aibek as he spoke. “We will prevail. This ship has already earned its stripes in battle, and you have acquitted yourselves as well as I could have ever hoped. It is an honor to lead you, and in the coming weeks and months, we will drive the League from our space. We will take the fight to them, and God willing, we’ll finish this war once and for all. Stand by for departure and man your stations. Colonel Cohen out.”

David glanced around the bridge, seeing energized and smiling crewmen and officers. Allowing a grin to crease his face, he turned toward Hammond. “Navigation, disengage all moorings and umbilicals.”

“All moorings and umbilicals disengaged, sir.”

“Navigation, take us out, all ahead, dead slow.”

“All ahead, dead slow, aye aye, sir.”

As the mighty vessel slowly began to move, David saw the shipyard bay they occupied start to disappear behind them. Aibek interrupted his thoughts. “Colonel, what does the star that was painted on our hull yesterday signify?” he asked.

“It’s a battle star.”

“What is that exactly, sir?”

“In the CDF, any ship in a major fleet engagement whose participation was meritorious is awarded a battle star for that engagement. Some, especially our older carriers, have

dozens." David smiled. "But the first one is always the one of which the crew is most proud."

"I see," Aibek said thoughtfully. "So many customs and oddities you humans have."

"We like to remember things."

"I am looking forward to learning from you, Colonel. You and the rest of your crew."

"I hope we can learn something from you as well."

"Oh, I'm sure we can both teach each other a few things," Aibek said with a chuckle.

David's eyes went back forward, watching as the stars moved as the *Lion* adjusted course. Standing watch for the next four hours, the ship began its journey to the proving ground, and he found himself thinking through tactics they could use against the League. After that, it was time for him to grab a quick lunch, and then retire to his office to handle paperwork and to prepare for the meeting he requested with Ruth.

Later that day, Ruth swung open the hatch to David's office and walked in. "Come in, Ruth," he said, the use of her first name indicating that it wasn't a formal exchange. She made her way to a chair in front of his desk.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Better now than I was," he said truthfully. "I still can't believe she's gone. I keep expecting her to walk through the door to the bridge and tell us it was all a big joke."

A smile crossed her face. "I know what you mean. She was a big inspiration to me, you know."

"I know she had been mentoring you."

Ruth closed her eyes for a moment. "She wanted me to try the command track. She also wanted me to let go of some of

my hate for the League."

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that."

Ruth opened her eyes, looking at him. "It's under control, sir."

"I'm not so sure of that," David said, his tone direct. "Something I've learned, and am still trying to learn, is that hating the enemy does nothing for me except harm me. It doesn't hurt them; it only makes me more like them."

"That sounds like Sheila speaking."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"I don't know. I'm still not sure how she managed to not end up hating every member of the League."

"Ruth, when we give in to hate, it hollows us out. Trust me, I know this from experience. Don't give in to it."

Ruth swallowed hard. "I'm trying. It's harder without her." Wanting to change the subject, she said, "You should come to the non-denominational church service this week. Sheila is the subject of the sermon."

David raised an eyebrow. "I would have expected to see you at shul instead."

Ruth gave a nervous smile. "I'd gone a few times with Sheila over the last few months. I wanted to go again."

David laughed. "What's next, converting and making your parents roll over in their graves?"

Ruth scowled. David realized his comment, while made in jest, had hurt. "No..." she said. "I've just felt at home there."

"Don't you feel more at home at the shul?" David said, softening his expression.

Ruth seemed to struggle to explain herself. "There's something about the idea of a personal connection with God. I can't quite explain it, but Sheila made that seem like a special experience. With all that goes on around us, this war, the death of our friends, I want something more than reading prayers."

“Judaism is about a lot more than reading prayers, Ruth.”

Ruth spoke before David could continue. “I know that, but what if God really did sacrifice his own son for us? Wouldn’t that be an amazing thing? What if we all lived by the ideals that Jesus espoused? Wouldn’t this galaxy be a better place?”

“Ruth, I… I think we all agree that Jesus was a good man,” he said, repeating something he had heard a rabbi say many years ago. “But we Jews don’t hold him to be the son of God. To us, he was just a good man that went off the rails.”

“But what if he wasn’t? Christians have survived repeated attempts to annihilate them. They endured in the face of that oppression, even when it would have been to their benefit to renounce their beliefs. In and of itself, that points to the idea that there was something to the basis of Christianity.”

“Ruth, we’ve endured repeated and systematic attempts to erase us from the universe too,” David began. “That’s not the litmus test for a religion being the one true gospel. We’re Jews and we have a rich history and culture. I’m proud to be a Jew.”

“As am I,” Ruth said emphatically. “But I think there’s something out there beyond the law. I go around wanting to judge everyone by the law, especially the League. What if it’s not my place to judge? What if there’s something more?”

“Then that’s something you will have to figure out. I’m not here to tell you that you’re right or wrong. All I will say is you need to remember you’re hurting right now. Don’t make any hasty choices.”

“You know me.”

David laughed out loud. “Yes, exactly. I know you pretty well after six months. Don’t make any hasty choices.” He recalled the old line about the only thing two Jews could agree on was what a third should give to charity.

“I won’t. I had my first one-on-one meeting with Colonel Aibek.”

David, glad she decided to switch topics, nodded. “He’s a very interesting individual.”

“I don’t think I’ve encountered a Saurian that’s as jovial as he is before.”

“I would have to agree. That said, he seems to know his business, and I think he’s a good man, well, Saurian,” David said, laughing as he did.

“Do they really eat live rodents? I heard one of the mess cooks talking about that.”

David rolled his eyes. “No. It’s interesting, honestly; they’re very much like us, except we believe they’re more based off a reptilian form of life.”

“I find it interesting that almost all of them are Christians. It’s fascinating to me that many of the cultures we’ve encountered have a religion that closely mimics Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. You would think that would lend some credence to the idea of God in someone like Doctor Hayworth.”

Many years ago, it had been discovered by Christian missionaries that the Saurian religion was centered around the belief that God had sent his son to die for their sins. It hadn’t taken long for comparisons to be made between human Christianity and the Saurian religion. Not all Saurians cared for the comparison, and there was some level of belief that humans were inferior among the Saurians. Still, there were enough direct similarities that David found the argument compelling.

“I remember reading a quote somewhere that atheism is the most dogmatic of all religions,” David said. “Men like Hayworth drive that sentiment home in spades. However, Dr. Hayworth is entitled to his beliefs and opinions, just as you and I are.”

Ruth quirked her face. “There are times I wish we could suppress people like him.”

That comment drew a sharp look from David. “Ruth, don’t go down that path. You can’t force people to believe something. They have to come upon it on their own. The end of that path is the League, except we’d be a theocracy that executes its citizens if they don’t toe the line. We left those guys behind on Earth, and I pray they never come back.”

“You’re telling me it doesn’t bother you when he insults God and insults the rest of us by saying he believes in the flying spaghetti monster?”

David laughed. “It does and it doesn’t. Someday, we will all stand in front of God, and we will be judged. Or… Hayworth is right and there’s nothing else beyond this existence. The doctor is not representative of most atheists I’ve known. I have a few friends that are agnostic or atheist, and they don’t make a sport out of insulting my beliefs. Regardless, it’s not our job to judge him. As long as all respect our traditions and don’t try to force their viewpoint onto the rest of us by demanding that we stop referencing our trust in God, for instance as a nation, they can do whatever they want. That’s one of our founding principles. Everyone has the right to believe whatever they so desire without interference from the government. That goes both ways, regardless of beliefs.”

Ruth smiled. “Point taken.”

David looked toward the clock. “It’s about time for dinner. Care to join me on the way to the wardroom?” he asked, referencing that the senior officers generally ate together onboard while underway in the ship’s wardroom.

“Of course, sir.”

Standing up from his desk, he walked around it as Ruth stood, falling in behind. David looked forward to the meal, the first time he would break bread with Lt. Colonel Aibek.

The man's jovial manner seemed to be infectious, and hopefully, he would integrate well into the rest of the senior staff. Regardless, the Saurian would be invaluable going forward as a liaison with the Saurian ships assigned to their battlegroup.

David's mind raced as quickly as he was walking. Endless possibilities now branched out from what had seemed like a dead end only a few weeks ago.

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Admiral Pierre Seville sat in his new stateroom on board his new flagship, the LSS *Annihilator*. The last two weeks had been interesting, he reflected, looking around the walls festooned with portraits of past League leaders. *I still have a hard time believing that Strappi didn't leave me to die when he could've. Especially the way I've treated him over the years.* After his evacuation from the *Destruction*, he'd been informed by a doctor onboard the cruiser he ended up on that he'd lose his other eye. Now he had two bionic eyes. Strangely enough, thanks to the technology level of the League, his artificial eyes were actually better than the real thing; but they still felt odd, like there was a foreign object in his brain.

The blame game has started, Seville thought bitterly. It was about the only thing the Social and Public Safety Committee was good at, assigning blame and executing traitors after the fact. Seville had played the game long enough to pin the tail as it were on everyone but him, namely those that were dead, including his flag captain. It pained him for a moment that the man's family would be reassigned to a work camp, but the moment was brief. In the end, only Seville's continued existence and success was a factor in his decision-making. To that end, he had successfully convinced the committee to

keep him in place as the leader of the military expedition against the Terran Coalition.

Seville had to admit he was impressed by the ingenuity shown by the Terrans. To get a new type of reactor working under their noses and without League spies coming upon the information was a shock. It was also surprising that they got lucky and put the exact ship needed to counteract his plan in place with no advance notice. Chuckling to himself, he considered that many in the Terran Coalition would likely chalk that luck up to a miracle from God. To him, it was simply proof that low probability events did occur.

One major thing that had changed with the Saurians entering the war on the side of the Terran Coalition was that the League now viewed the conflict through a new lens. More ships would be coming, newer ships, and more troops. Seville had been promised they would see double the ships and troops in the next few months, but he would believe that when he saw it.

The chime at his hatch rang. "Yes?" he said, annoyed.

"Admiral, it is Colonel Strappi."

Oh goody, Seville thought to himself. "Come in, Colonel."

The door opened on Seville's command, and Colonel Strappi walked into the stateroom. "Sit down, Colonel. Make yourself comfortable," Seville said with gaiety in his voice.

"I did not expect your spirits to be so high, Admiral," Strappi said cautiously.

Seville regarded the political officer for a moment. He really did despise political officers, but Strappi had grown on him, especially after he saved his life. He'd resolved not to openly mock the man as much as he used to. "In spite of our recent setbacks, Colonel, we're closer now to winning than ever before."

Strappi raised an eyebrow. "With respect, sir, how do you fathom that? Our flagship was destroyed. You were nearly

killed, an elite strike team I didn't even know existed was destroyed, and the religious fanatics of the Terran Coalition are braying to the entire galaxy how their God saved them. If that wasn't enough, the Saurians joined this so-called Canaan Alliance, and there's intelligence intercepts that suggest the Matrinids will as well. On the face of it, this looks like a total disaster."

Seville laughed out loud. "Colonel, you're supposed to be our morale officer. That sounds like a report I'd hear on that infernal Canaan News Channel. You're not looking at it the right way."

Strappi snorted. "How should I be looking at it, sir?"

"Yes, the Terrans won a victory. And yes, it's done a lot of things for them. Oh, over the next six months, we'll get our asses handed to us in every battle. They've got high morale, ours is low, they received what amounts to their entire military as reinforcements and they've got a hero to motivate them." Seville leaned forward in his seat. "But the very things that give them strength, we can turn against them and use to destroy the Terran Coalition once and for all."

Strappi sat in silence, waiting for Seville to go on.

"We will bide our time, marshal our reinforcements, and trade space for time. The Terrans and their newfound allies will press the advantage. They will stretch out their supply lines, and at a time and place of our choosing, we will overwhelm one of their battlegroups with numbers, and begin to roll them back."

Strappi nodded. "But what about that new ship of theirs? It outclasses anything we have."

Seville shook his head. "It's a gimmick ship. Yes, it's got advanced technology and its commander is resourceful and capable. But it's only one ship. We almost had them in our

first engagement. All we have to do is overwhelm it with numbers."

Strappi looked a bit doubtful. "I understand, sir, but I worry about the cost it will take to destroy that ship. I worry for our morale."

Seville allowed a grin to cross his face. "There's one more thing, Colonel. That ship, for better or for worse, has been turned into a hero by the Terran Coalition's media. Its crew, its captain; they're all heroes. That's a powerful weapon against us because the entire sequence of events has given the Terrans hope again. Hope is a powerful ally in combat, but in doing so, they've handed us a weapon. All we have to do is destroy that ship, and we'll grind their hope under our feet."

For the first time since he had sat down, Strappi looked as if he bought what Seville was selling. "In other words, destroy that ship, kill the hope, and they'll collapse?"

Seville nodded. "Exactly. We're going to destroy the *Lion of Judah*, kill Colonel Cohen, and make sure that's front-page news. When we do, the Terran Coalition's will to fight will fall apart. You and I will be the heroes of the League and someday we will be in a position to effect real change within the League."

Strappi looked up, fear in his eyes. "Those are… dangerous words, Admiral."

"Words that need to be spoken, Colonel. And you will be safest at my side."

"I live to serve, Admiral," he responded neutrally.

Seville again responded with a smile. "All in good time, Colonel. All in good time. But today, we rest and lick our wounds. Tomorrow, we begin to organize the strike that will destroy the Terran Coalition."

Strappi raised his arm and made the fist of the League. "To victory!"

Seville mimicked the motion. “To victory!”

DAVID WALKED INTO HIS STATEROOM. He had just completed his first watch and spent some time attending to paperwork in his office before having dinner with the senior officers in the wardroom. *Another long but productive day in the books*, he thought to himself. The *Lion* would complete its final Lawrence drive jump into the testing area at 0700 the next morning, and they’d have two weeks to find as many things wrong with the ship as possible before going into combat. A tall order, but one David was happy to fulfill.

Taking off his uniform to get ready for bed, he made a cup of hot tea. *My reward for a hard day’s work, and it’ll help me sleep.* Sitting on the couch with the hot mug in between his hands, his eyes roamed over pictures he had put up: the one of him, his father and his mother, a picture of him and Sheila, among others. Looking out at the stars in the quiet of the night, David realized that something had changed deep within him.

It would be about six months ago when he was alone and looking out into the vast sea of stars that he would begin to feel small and not up to the task at hand. He would question everything about himself, his decisions, feelings, and abilities. But tonight, looking out of his window, he realized that those doubts had been replaced by a quiet confidence that required no boasting, ego, or validation. A confidence that he was able, by the grace and help of God, to meet whatever the League threw at him, to lead his crew into battle, and bring as many as possible home safe and sound. That was his calling and his duty, and for the first time in many years, perhaps even in his entire life, David was completely ready, committed, and confident.

Tomorrow was a new day, and in two weeks' time, David Cohen, the *Lion of Judah*, and the full might of the Terran Coalition and the Saurian Empire was coming for the League of Sol, and if he was still alive, Admiral Seville. President Spencer had said that Seville was wanted dead or alive, inviting comparisons to the wild west of six hundred years ago back on Earth. He chided himself for wishing more for the dead than alive part of that statement. As the quote that was attributed to dozens of people—though no one was really sure where it came from— "It's not our job to judge the League's soldiers. That's God's job. Our job is to arrange a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible." Chuckling to himself, he was sure Sheila would have playfully yelled at him for saying that, but tonight, he'd enjoy his tea and drink to the possibility of finally driving the League and its oppression out of Terran Coalition space once and for all.

THE END

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